

The void left behind

AHMED RASHID

THE assassination of Benazir Bhutto has left a huge political vacuum at the heart of this nuclear-armed state, which appears to be slipping into an abyss of violence and Islamic extremism. The question of what happens next is almost impossible to answer, especially at a moment when Bhutto herself seemed to be the only answer.

Pakistanis are in shock. Many are numb, and others are filled with unimaginable grief. Thousands have taken to the streets, burning vehicles and attacking police stations in an explosion of violence against the government. Bhutto's death yesterday will almost certainly lead to the cancellation of the Jan. 8 parliamentary elections (already, the nation's second-largest opposition party has called for a boycott if the vote is held) and the possible imposition of extraordinary measures by the military -- another state of emergency or even martial law. President Pervez

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Musharraf's own political future has never been less certain.

Bhutto's death leaves the largest possible vacuum at the core of Pakistan's shaky and blood-stained political system. Twice elected prime minister in the 1990s, twice dismissed on charges of corruption and incompetence by the military, Bhutto was a giant of a politician in a land of political pygmies and acolytes of the military.

In recent weeks, she had publicly taken on the Taliban extremists -- something Musharraf has not dared to do, despite all his bluster and bonhomie with President Bush since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. With Bhutto gone, there is no one who can play such a role.

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million people, was immensely brave and absolutely necessary if Pakistan is to remain in the polity of nations. Whatever her shortcomings, she loved her country and gave her life for it.

She and her party commanded the die-hard loyalty of at least one-third of the electorate. Her supporters were vehemently against army rule and Islamic extremism.

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her. She was too secular, too worldly and perhaps too wise. Bhutto was killed leaving a political rally in Rawalpindi, just two miles from where her father, prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was hanged by another military dictator 30 years ago. The tragedy of the Bhutto family -- her brothers also were killed, one poisoned, one shot, and her husband spent seven years in prison -- has become part of the saga and struggle to undermine, and how to tackle the extremism spreading in the country.

Yesterday, her party's stalwarts were on the streets, accusing Musharraf and the military of perpetrating the latest murder of a Bhutto. That is extremely unlikely; not least because last night the government itself was in despair.

The attack -- a gunman cut her

down before a suicide-bomb explosion blew up her vehicle, early reports suggest -- bore the hallmarks of training by the al-Qaeda terrorists ensconced in northwest Pakistan.

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If the elections are canceled, it is imperative that Musharraf drop his single-minded desire for power and establish a national government made up of all the country's leading politicians and parties. Together, they may agree on how to

conduct an orderly election while trying to beat back the specter of extremism that is haunting this benighted land. But Musharraf may not survive the fallout of Bhutto's death. His actions have not been honorable, and none of the political opposition is willing to sit down with him. It is unlikely that they will accept Musharraf's continued presidency.

If rioting and political mayhem worsen, if the opposition refuses to cooperate with Musharraf and the United States finally begins to distance itself from him, then the army may be forced to tell Musharraf to call it a day. If that happens, it will be even more urgent that the world support a national government, elections and a speedy return to civilian rule -- and not another military dictatorship.

Courtesy: The Washington Post

Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani journalist, is the author of "Taliban" and "Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia."



NEWS ANALYSIS

Impact on US diplomacy amid division

HELENE COOPER AND STEVEN LEE MYERS

THE assassination of Benazir Bhutto on Thursday left in ruins the delicate diplomatic effort the Bush administration had pursued in the past year to reconcile Pakistan's deeply divided political factions. Now it is scrambling to sort through ever more limited options, as American influence on Pakistan's internal affairs continues to decline.

On Thursday, officials at the American Embassy in Islamabad reached out to members of the political party of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, according to a senior administration official. The very fact that officials are even talking to backers of Mr. Sharif, who they believe have too many ties to Islamists, suggests how hard it will be to find a partner the United States fully trusts.

The assassination, highlighted, in spectacular fashion, the failure of two of President Bush's main objectives in the region: his quest to bring democracy to the Muslim world, and his drive to force out the Islamist militants who have hung on tenaciously in Pakistan, the nuclear-armed state considered ground zero in President Bush's fight against terrorism, despite the administration's long-running effort to root out al-Qaeda from the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

Administration officials say the United States still wants the Pakistani elections to proceed, either as scheduled on Jan. 8 or soon after. But several senior administration officials acknowl-

Bush administration officials on Thursday had still not given up hope that Mr. Musharraf may be able to strike a ruling coalition with whoever becomes Ms. Bhutto's successor in her Pakistan Peoples Party. Mr. Bush's continued strong support for Mr. Musharraf could further erode his already declining popular support, even if the administration still sees his leadership as the best guarantor of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal.

edged that President Pervez Musharraf may decide to put off the elections if the already unstable political climate in Pakistan deteriorates further.

The administration official said American Embassy officials were trying to reach out to Pakistani political players across the board in the aftermath of the Bhutto assassination.

"Look, most of the people in Musharraf's party came out of Nawaz's party, the official said, referring to Mr. Sharif and speaking on condition of anonymity because of diplomatic sensitivities. While he acknowledged that an alliance between Mr. Sharif and Mr. Musharraf was unlikely given the long enmity between the men, he added, I wouldn't predict anything in politics."

Foreign policy analysts and diplomats said that if there were one thing that Ms. Bhutto's assassination had made clear, it was the inability of the United States to manipulate the internal political affairs of Pakistan. Even before the assassination, the United States had limited influence and did not back Ms. Bhutto to the hilt.

"We are a player in the Pakistani political system," said Wendy Chamberlin, a former United

States ambassador to Pakistan, adding that as such, the United States was partly to blame for Mr. Musharraf's dip in popularity. But, she added: This is Pakistan. And Pakistan is a very dangerous and violent place."

That said, Pakistan has never been more important for the United States than it is right now as it teeters on the edge of internal chaos. Bush administration officials have been trying mightily to balance the American insistence that Pakistan remain on the path to democracy and Mr. Musharraf's unwillingness to risk unrest that would allow al-Qaeda and the Taliban to operate more freely, particularly with American and NATO troops next door in Afghanistan.

That is why the administration had been fighting so hard, amid skepticism from many of its allies, to broker an agreement in which the increasingly unpopular Mr. Musharraf would share power with Ms. Bhutto after presidential and parliamentary elections. American officials viewed the power-sharing proposal partly as a way to force Mr. Musharraf onto a democratic path, and partly to relieve the growing pressure for his ouster.

On the basis of that plan, Ms.

Bhutto returned to Pakistan in October after eight years of self-imposed exile.

But the power-sharing deal never came to fruition, as the increasingly besieged Mr. Musharraf imposed a series of autocratic measures that left him politically weakened.

Administration officials continued to prod Ms. Bhutto toward an arranged marriage with Mr. Musharraf even during the emergency rule. Deputy Secretary of State John D. Negroponte traveled to Pakistan in November, and spoke by telephone to Ms. Bhutto while Mr. Musharraf had her under house arrest. With both sides balking at the power-sharing deal -- an agreement one Bush official acknowledged was "like putting two pythons in the same cage" -- Mr. Negroponte continued to push Ms. Bhutto to agree to the plan according to members of Ms. Bhutto's political party.

"I think it was insane," said Teresita Schaefer, a Pakistan expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, of the proposed alliance. "I don't think Musharraf ever wanted to share power."

Until this week, Bush administration officials were still hoping that Mr. Musharraf and Ms. Bhutto

would form an alliance between their political parties after Pakistan's Jan. 8 elections, which would bring about as close to a pro-American governing coalition in Pakistan as the United States was likely to get.

The Bhutto assassination upends that plan, but Bush administration officials on Thursday had still not given up hope that Mr. Musharraf may be able to strike a ruling coalition with whoever becomes Ms. Bhutto's successor in her Pakistan Peoples Party.

The problem with that scenario, though, is that Pakistani political parties are much more about strong, powerful individuals -- like Mr. Musharraf, Ms. Bhutto, or Mr. Sharif -- than about the parties themselves. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice telephoned Ms. Bhutto's second-in-command, Makhdoom Amin Fahim, to offer sympathy, and she pledged to continue to support elections in Pakistan, administration officials said.

Mr. Bush's continued strong support for Mr. Musharraf could further erode his already declining popular support, even if the administration still sees his leadership as the best guarantor of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal.

"The danger is the centrist

elements of Pakistan will be so demoralised," said Stephen P. Cohen, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. He criticised the administration for not nurturing Pakistan's opposition for so long after Mr. Musharraf's coup in 1999. He expressed hope that the United States could still urge moderate parties to ally themselves with Mr. Musharraf, forming a governing coalition, assuming that the elections go ahead.

"It should wake up anybody who thinks that Pakistan is a stable country and that we can deal only with Musharraf," Mr. Cohen said of the assassination.

Ms. Schaefer and other Pakistan experts say the administration was making a mistake by viewing Mr. Sharif with suspicion. They said that he was a moderate who will work with the United States in fight against terrorism, citing his cooperation with Clinton administration Senator Arlen Specter, Republican of Pennsylvania, was in Islamabad with Rep. Patrick J. Kennedy, Democrat of Rhode Island, on a scheduled trip and preparing to meet Ms. Bhutto at 9 pm Thursday when the news of the bombing broke. They watched the news in their hotel, with initial reports that she had escaped in injury giving way to confirmation of her death.

"I think our foreign policy relied on her personality as a stabilizing force," Mr. Specter told reporters by telephone. "Now, without her, we have to regroup."

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MEMORIES OF BENAZIR BHUTTO

The chirpy teenager, the old e-mails.

Benazir Bhutto was the modern, liberal face of her otherwise poor, feudal and ill-governed country. She was Pakistan's light at the end of the tunnel. Now, with her death, the tunnel can only get longer and darker.

to interview her for the newspaper I worked for at the time. Would she agree? To my intense surprise and happiness, she did not say no and asked me to e-mail my questions to her in Dubai. Within a few days she came back with the answers. We carried the interview.

And then for close to three years Benazir Bhutto and I kept in touch by e-mail. At one point I thought it necessary to let her in on the information that we had met in 1970. She was pleased. In her messages to me, she always addressed me as "Syed Saab", which I found rather amusing. As I got increasingly involved in my work in Dhaka, my wife Zakia, living in London, developed links with Benazir Bhutto, who had begun spending a great length of time in that city. They met often, and stayed in contact by telephone. The last time they met, Zakia and Benazir went out for lunch in London, a few paces away from where her sister Sanam lived.

Pakistan's former prime minister gave my wife a copy of a rather gushing biography of her penned by a loyalist. It is still there, autographed by Benazir on the shelf right behind me as I write this paean to the assassinated Pakistani politician. And I write not because Benazir Bhutto fascinated me with her intellect or her politics (I could never agree with her assessment of the Bangladesh war of 1971 and was disappointed when she refused to acknowledge the stranded Biharis as citizens of Pakistan). I write because of the power woman she was in all the years she stayed busy with the calling of politics. It is her resilience that I pay tribute to, as I remember the heart-breaking meeting she had with her father only hours before he was led to the gallows by a crude military regime in 1979.

Benazir Bhutto was a cosmopolitan in every sense of the term and certainly lit up any room she stepped into. In the late 1980s, as her motorcade rode by in London, a future president of the United States named Bill Clinton wished loudly that he could meet her. He did, when she came calling at the White House; and like so many others who met her, he was left deeply impressed. Her modernity was often disturbing for some of her countrymen. And then, in very traditional manner, she gave birth to babies even as she practised the profession of politics. She was a beautiful woman and as she moved from her forties into her fifties, the beauty seemed to blaze even more in her. She was one of those rare Third World politicians who most charmingly enhanced the appeal of politics through an infusion of the glamorous into it. She was at ease in the company of individuals more powerful than she in politics. Media men everywhere were only too willing to fall for her charisma, for she was smart and she spoke well.

Benazir Bhutto was the modern, liberal face of her otherwise poor, feudal and ill-governed country. She was Pakistan's light at the end of the tunnel. Now, with her death, the tunnel can only get longer and darker.

And I will remember all the old words from her, in all those old e-mails. The world is a poorer place today without Benazir Bhutto to give it a heave-ho.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

Lending artefacts to foreign museums

PROF. SELINA MOHSIN

ACHIEVEMENTS possess its own history and culture. Arts and artefacts are evidence of a country's history which is unique. Some countries were homes of ancient civilizations and their historical objects enable us to understand their past history, culture and way of life. There are other countries where history and culture reached a glorious period during the middle ages or even later.

The heritage that survives from the past provides glimpses of what life was like centuries earlier. The preservation and display of such art and objects demonstrates an appreciation of the intrinsic value of tradition, culture, changing times, way of thinking and styles of the past.

Museums in most countries preserve, exhibit and lend their historical arts and artefacts to foreign museums so that numerous people of different cultures can appreciate the heritage of other countries. In addition to displaying work of historical significance on

displays stimulate interest of a fascinating period and of forgotten cultures, kingdoms and empires. It even adds value and understanding of our own heritage.

The Palaces of St. Petersburg, the four imperial palaces of the Czar's of Imperial Russia with many priceless treasures and masterpieces, were on loan at the Mississippi Arts Pavilion, USA, in 1996. It was one of the largest Russian Exhibitions outside the country showcasing over 600 priceless objects. No endeavour of this magnitude could have been mounted without dedication, commitment and integrity of the Russian and American staff.

"Prince Splendor", an exhibition of the Dresden Court between 1580-1620 mounted at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Germany. It showed through art that the character of Dresden was profoundly shaped by its history from the late Renaissance to the late Baroque period.

Most countries and museums that lend historical objects, including items of natural history, assist

the viewers, to learn and understand through works of historical significance the contributions of specific periods, often complex but always interesting. To cite a few examples, one of the roles of the Portland Art Museum in USA is to loan historical objects to foreign museums and to receive such objects for own display.

The Harvard Museum of Natural History has an international travel programme. The Leo Baeck Institute (LBI) for the study of history & culture of German speaking Jews is frequently requested to make its works available on loan to museums, galleries and exhibitions around the world.

The famous Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London is the world's greatest museum of applied and decorative arts. Its collection is available through loans to numerous other museums.

In recent years, there rose a need to understand and appreciate Islamic art and culture. The V&A recently mounted the most significant collection of Islamic ceramics,

silks, carpets, metal work, glass, manuscripts, paintings and other media with the generosity of Harwell plc. part of Abdul Jameel Group. The Jameel Gallery of Islamic Art is the finest in the world.

The Royal Academy in London mounts a continuous programme of internationally renowned loan exhibitions.

Often loaning a country's historical works can be a blessing regarding preservation. In developing countries, with rich historical background, some of the artefacts and manuscripts are quite often not preserved in controlled environment. As such, a decision to send arts and objects on loan attracts attention on the poor condition in which they were stored. Then, the question of adequate preservation becomes predominant and while sending such objects abroad it prompts the government of the concerned country to improve the conditions in which historical objects were earlier stored.

Certainly, there is always an ethical dimension in lending and borrowing historical works of art.

Prof. Selina Mohsin is Education Adviser, Program Support Unit of Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

an excellent patriotic job.

It is understood the participating scholars are attending 20 seminars to present papers and discuss and debate various subjects including governance, local government, economic development, agriculture, investment, information technology, health education, use of submarine cable, renewable energy etc.

The nation expects concrete, substantive and implementable proposals and results out of the conference and follow-up action by joint effort of the organisers, NRB professionals, the government and private organisations, lest the conference should end into a meaning-euphoria over a galaxy of our NRB scholars and professionals.

The ostensible purpose of hold-

ing the conference supposedly is to honour our brilliant sons and daughters who have earned great eminence and distinction in their respective specialised area of work abroad. It is not understood why the local eminent artists and scholars have been included in the list of award winners in recognition of their talent and scholarship. The focus of the conference is also how best to harness NRBs resources, talent, skill and expertise for purposes of our national development. For obvious reasons of lack of job opportunity and facility for research, we could not contain the brain drain from our country. It is not sensible to expect of the NRB scholars and professionals to leave their lucrative jobs and return home. However, it is needless

to say that the expatriates owe a debt of deep gratitude to their motherland for getting their early academic training in schools, universities and medical colleges almost for free in terms of dollars, at the expense of public exchequer. It is their moral responsibility to return the debt by their involvement in national development in one way or another by way of investment of money in business, investment of their talent and skill in human resource development in the field of education, health, information technology, water, sanitation and environment, agriculture etc.

May be, many of the NRB scholars and professionals are keen and willing to make their contribution in their respective fields provided

there is available favourable condition and facilities and a permanent institutional arrangement by the government. The government may take appropriate action in the matter by instituting an 'expatriate talent pool project', in every concerned ministry and department to attend to offers of investment and training and research assistance by expatriate Banglades