

## Election in jeopardy as search starts for Benazir's heir

Charismatic leader's death has left her country in flames, the region under threat and the world in danger.

RAYMOND WHITAKER, SAEED SHAH and OMAR WARAIKH

In a dramatic development which shows the depth of the crisis in Pakistan over the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, the government yesterday called for her body to be exhumed to settle the question of how she died.

The charismatic political leader was buried in a sealed coffin on Friday, less than 24 hours after she died in an attack by a suicide bomber at a rally in Rawalpindi. The caretaker Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mohammad Mian Soomro, told the Cabinet that Ms Bhutto's husband, Asif Ali Zardari, had insisted on no autopsy, a statement he has not contested. But conflicting accounts of how she died, and disputes over who bore responsibility, have fuelled rioting that by yesterday had claimed more than 40 lives and caused tens of millions of dollars of damage.

Suspicions over the complicity of Pervez Musharraf's government in the killing were fuelled by its failure to order a post-mortem, regardless of Mr Zardari's wishes, and the fact that the scene of the bombing was washed down with a high-pressure hose within an hour, removing potential forensic evidence. Under the criminal law of Pakistan, an autopsy should have been mandatory, according to a leading lawyer, Athar Minallah. "It is absurd because without autopsy it is not possible to investigate," he said. "Is the state not interested in reaching the perpetrators of this heinous crime, or was there a cover-up?"

Yesterday an Interior Ministry spokesman said an offer had been made to Ms Bhutto's family and her Pakistan People's Party (PPP) to exhume her remains for scientific examination. There was no immediate response. But in her ancestral village of Naudero in rural Sindh province, where she was buried beside her father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and where her husband was receiving a stream of mourners offering condolences among them his wife's former bitter political rival, Nawaz Sharif, supporters continued to accuse the government of responsibility for her death.

Ms Bhutto died as she was leaving the rally on Thursday evening. The car in which she was travelling was bullet and blast-proof, but she had stood up through the open roof to wave to her supporters when the attackers approached. Two or three shots were heard seconds before the explosion.

Doctors at the hospital where she was taken initially said she had been shot twice, but some of them later said the cause of death was sharpened from the explosion. On Friday, however, the Interior Ministry said Ms Bhutto had suffered no bullet or serious shrapnel wounds, and the car's other occupants had been unharmed by the bomb explosion, which killed at least 20 other people. Instead a new explanation was put forward: the charismatic political leader had fractured her skull as the blast from the bomb slammed her into the handle which opened the car's roof.

The claim that her death was accidental, and the announcement



that intercepted phone calls showed al-Qa'ida carried out the bombing, were seen by her supporters as an attempt by the government to deny any blame for her killing. "To hear that Ms Bhutto fell from an impact from a bump on a sunroof is absolutely rubbish," Sherry Rehman, a PPP spokeswoman who was with her at the time, said yesterday. "There was a clear bullet wound at the back of the neck. It went in one direction and came out another ... My entire car is coated with her blood, my clothes, everybody so she did not concuss her head against the sunroof."

Babar Awan, a senior party spokesman, said the sunroof claim was "false". He had seen her body and there were at least two bullet marks, one in the neck and one on the top of the head. "It was a targeted, planned killing. The firing was from more than one side," said Mr Awan.

Although the violence in the wake of the killing is fairly sporadic by Pakistani standards, the country has been paralysed during the three days of mourning declared for Ms Bhutto, ending tomorrow. The government said 176 banks, 72 train carriages and 18 stations had been destroyed, and petrol stations across the country were closed for fear of attack, creating long queues of cars at the few that remained open. Many flights were cancelled, leaving passengers stranded.

With shops shuttered in many parts of Pakistan, there were fears of food shortages. In Karachi, scene of some of the worst outbreaks, the police were authorised to open fire on rioters if they were attacked, and three people were killed in a clash yesterday as food stores were looted. "There was bound to be a

reaction to such a tragedy," said Farhat Hayat, a senior Karachi police officer. "Hopefully the situation will calm down over the coming days. We are monitoring things very closely."

The accusations of Ms Bhutto's close associates, and the reaction of her followers on the streets, are only part of the pressure on President Musharraf, who is facing conflicting demands to quit and to delay the election, scheduled for 8 January, which he had hoped would legitimise his increasingly unpopular regime. At the urging of Britain and America, increasingly concerned at the growing strength of Islamist extremism in Pakistan, he had sought a power-sharing deal with Ms Bhutto under which she was allowed to return from eight years in exile.

The loss of the PPP leader, who for all her flaws was the only determinedly secular political leader in Pakistan, leaves Western policy in disarray. After the 9/11 attacks the US set aside its criticism of Mr Musharraf, who as chief of the army seized power from Mr Sharif in 1999, and set him up as a bulwark in its "war on terror". Since 2001 Pakistan has received nearly \$11bn (£5.5bn) in American aid, but Mr Musharraf's lack of a democratic mandate has not only made him unable to deal with Islamist militancy but has forced him to compromise with the military.

In many respects, this was simply the latest in a series of bombings that have caused increasing tension in Pakistan because no one can be sure who is carrying them out. No official findings have been made public on the perpetrators of the previous attack on Ms Bhutto, in Karachi on 18 October, the day she returned from eight years in exile.

She herself, and many ordinary people in Pakistan, believed that elements of the army and the intelligence agencies are behind the bombings. But security experts think that while there may be rogue officers within the army and intelligence that provide help to militants, the wholesale involvement of the state is improbable. For one thing, it is the army itself that is the

Afghanistan to oust al-Qa'ida and its Taliban hosts, has now reversed. Instead of Afghanistan threatening to destabilise the region, it is Pakistan, and particularly its ungoverned tribal areas along the border, where al-Qa'ida and the Taliban have fled, that has become the problem.

The MQM, the Karachi-based party which draws its support from Urdu speakers who fled India at Partition, has come under suspicion. It had a history of violent clashes with the Pakistan People's Party in the 1990s, and some believed it could be involved in the attacks on Ms Bhutto. However, while there is evidence that the MQM has been involved in extortion, beatings and murder, it does not seem able or motivated to carry out anything on the scale of the bombings on 18 October and 27 December.

"Bhutto's death will exponentially exacerbate the existing state of political unrest, because the blame will fall on Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's regime," said Kamran Bokhari, director of Middle East analysis at consultancy Strategic Forecasting.

"This situation benefits the Taliban and al-Qa'ida and their supporters who would want Pakistan's security forces to be busy containing political unrest and violence rather than performing counter-jihadist operations focused on north-western Pakistan."

The Pakistan People's Party has been left hollow. Founded by Ms Bhutto's father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, it works as an institutionalised cult for the Bhutto family. The allegiance of its followers was to the memory of Mr Bhutto, who was enormously popular among Pakistan's poor, and through him to Ms Bhutto. The party never held internal elections. Benazir named herself "president for life" and never allowed other senior officials to become national figures. The deputy leader of the party, Mr Akram Faih, is respected, but he lacks charisma and could in no way replace her.

So who could inherit this dynasty? Mr Zardari has been most prominent since his wife's death, and said yesterday that a meeting of the PPP central committee would be held soon. He also announced that the couple's eldest child and only son, Bilawal, a 19-year-old student in his first term at Oxford University, would read out his mother's will today. Asked whether he could take over as PPP leader, Mr Zardari said he was "too young".

What about Mr Zardari himself? What did the will say? Mr Zardari, who said yesterday he had only just become acquainted with the document's contents, told questioners to "wait and see". But few see him as a plausible leader in the longer term. Not only is he not from the top tier of Sindh's feudal families, as the Bhuttos are, he remains entangled in corruption investigations in several countries outside Pakistan, where he benefited from the political deal that brought him and his wife from the cold. Now she is gone, he could be vulnerable once more.

Benazir's mother, Begum Nusrat Bhutto, is too old, and in poor health. Her sister Saman, the only surviving child of Zulfikar, has always avoided political involvement. There are other people in

main target of the explosions. The Inter-Services Intelligence organisation, often accused of undercover political operations and killings, has been hit by two huge bombs on buses this year that killed scores of its officers as they were going to work.

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Unless an autopsy resolves the question of how Benazir died, her death will remain as much of a mystery as those of her father, the man who ousted him, and her brother, Zulfikar, who was overthrown by his army chief, General Zia ul-Haq, and sentenced to death by a military court, was hurriedly buried in 1979 under strict army supervision. No autopsy was carried out, despite claims that he was actually tortured to death, nothwithstanding.

In 1988, when General Zia was blown out of the sky, his remains were never handed over for scientific examination. The explosion on board his aircraft has never been explained. As for Ms Bhutto's brother, Murtaza, he had fallen out with the family and formed a guerrilla group to oppose military rule. In 1996, when his sister was prime minister, he was gunned down in Karachi during a clash with police. No policemen were ever charged in connection with the incident, which remains murky.

In other circumstances Murtaza's 25-year-old journalist daughter Fatima might be seen as Benazir's heir. She is as intelligent and feisty as her aunt, but ceaselessly attacked her in her newspaper columns, always referring to her as "Mrs Zardari" to emphasise that she was influenced more by her husband than her father. But she did pay her respects in Naudero, leaving open the possibility of a reconciliation.

Then there is a family elder, Mumtaz Bhutto, who resented Benazir's seizure of the limelight. Her less than principled deal to share power with President Musharraf gave him ammunition. He said they were conspiring to "strip Pakistan's bones clean" but it remains to be seen whether he or anyone else can hold the PPP together and prevent it collapsing into factions. What seems certain is that the party will not want the elections to be held next week.

Mr Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-N said after the assassination that it would now boycott the poll. Even the MQM, which is closely allied to President Musharraf, called for the election to be postponed.

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Given Pakistan's turmoil, the international community is likely to accept a temporary postponement of the elections. Members of Pakistan's political class and analysts are in agreement that the government will have to steer the country back towards stability. But too long a delay could raise another possibility: that the military might step in.

It is common in Pakistani politics for whoever is out of power to demand that the incumbents be removed by the generals and for fresh elections to be called. But numerous previous interventions in politics have made most military commanders highly wary of becoming entangled in politics, and President Musharraf, who famously declared in 1999, "I will not perpetuate myself", has yet to let go.

Future of the dynasty

Asif Ali Zardari 51, Benazir's widower. Married in 1987, they had three children. Like his wife, he is from a Sindh feudal family, though much less prominent. He became known as "Mr 10 Per Cent" during his period in office, and charges of corruption against him may be revived now Benazir is gone.

Bilawal Zardari 19, Benazir's eldest child and only son, is in his first term at Oxford University. His father says he is too young to succeed, but today he is due to read out his mother's will, which may spell out his future. Significantly, her Karachi residence was named Bilawal House after him.

Sanam Bhutto 50, the only survivor among Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's four children. Devoted to her elder sister Benazir, she went with her into exile and has always shunned politics. In 1996, when her husband Murtaza was gunned down in a clash with police, she was shot dead by police in 1996, while she was pregnant.

Asif Ali Zardari 25, Benazir's niece, shares her intelligence and looks, but accused her aunt of complicity in the death of her father. Murtaza. He had fallen out with his sister, and was shot dead by police in 1996, while she was pregnant.

The US could greenlight a temporary army takeover with the

Courtesy: The Independent, UK

## Benazir's security was lax

ANNE JILLANI

ENAZIR Bhutto probably would have been alive today and addressing a public rally at this very moment had she not been overwhelmed by her feelings for party workers who were standing at the Liaquat Bagh. She emerged from the sunroof of her Land Cruiser and was shot dead (as was initially reported) by an unknown assassin who then allegedly blew himself up.

Her vehicle was bulletproof and the suicide blast would not have affected her, like the other passengers in the vehicle, had she remained inside.

We will probably never be able to find out who masterminded her killing and who was actually her assassin. Let alone this assassination we have yet to unravel the mysteries surrounding the deaths of past leaders. Benazir was hit on College Road at around 5.20 pm.

By 9 pm, the municipality in Rawalpindi had washed the road in record time. Benazir was buried by 5 pm the next day in her ancestral village, and thus another chapter of our history has been washed and buried in the midst of clumsiness and nonsensicality.

I have been living in Rawalpindi and Islamabad for almost four decades now and have hardly

missed a public meeting at Liaquat Bagh. The Dec 27 rally in the Bagh was the smallest that Benazir ever held there. I was astonished to see that almost two-thirds of the ground was empty which could be attributed to the public's disapproval of Benazir's deal with President Musharraf or the fear of a suicide attack.

Despite this, I was astonished to hear some of the media folks repeatedly stating in their broadcasts that the rally was big. I was sitting on top of the same trailer on which all the electronic media men were placed in the press enclosure. It was officially announced that the meeting would commence at 11.30 am but Benazir reached the venue at around 3 pm. This was late even by her own standards but she was probably waiting for the

start of the meeting but soon relaxed once the speeches started. Soon lethargy caught up with them and almost all of them could be seen chatting in groups of three or four enjoying peanuts on a beautiful sunny afternoon.

A policeman sitting on a chair in the press enclosure with a stick in his hand constantly irritated me, looking like he had come to watch a stage drama. Four young guys, three of them incidentally bearded, stood alertly on the ground next to

the stage, with automatic weapons. There were one or two policemen on top of some of the buildings, particularly on the side of College Road where the blast took place.

The problem started with the exit points. Apparently there were not enough policemen deployed around Ms Bhutto's vehicle, as can be seen from the last photographs of that momentous event.

I had approached the press enclosure gate on College Road when the blast took place; I was thus less than 30 feet from the site. The gate was locked. I rushed towards the wall to see what had happened. I still remember the bewildered faces of policemen looking at me rather than towards the blast site; some female police officers had huddled into a corner and a few were crying.

I rushed towards the blast site and sadly not a single policeman had arrived on the scene. More than 20 badly burnt bodies were lying on College Road. Most spectators were simply hysterically shouting or beating their heads in shock and daze.

Few had dared to reach the spot as perhaps everybody was scared of a follow-up blast. I was quickly looking for survivors; I saw a guy breathing but his lower portion was destroyed. Two fellow lawyers were lying dead, with one guy's face on

the ground.

He appeared to me to be a close jiyala friend and I thus apprehensively tried to swerve him to one side to see his face. Sticky stuff stuck to my hands which I can still feel. It was not my friend but was another lawyer in