

# 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, Mohamud 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.

Suspensions 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 shrapnel 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 official, 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 it.

Extremist influence in parts of the military and intelligence establishment of this nuclear-armed state have led some analysts to conclude that Pakistan is now more of a danger to world peace than Afghanistan, from where the 9/11 attacks were carried out. The situation in 2001, when the US, Britain and their allies intervened in

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 ungovernable tribal areas along the border, where al-Qa'ida and the Taliban have fled, that has become the problem.

The 44,000 Nato troops, 7,800 of them British, who are battling to prevent a Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan will never succeed while their opponents have bases across the border from which they can attack with impunity. But intense pressure on Mr Musharraf to deal with the insurgents on his own territory has been of little avail. Not only were the Pakistani army's sometimes half-hearted incursions into the tribal areas bloodily repulsed, with hundreds of soldiers being captured, but Pakistan has paid the price in an upsurge of terrorism.

The country is under assault from al-Qa'ida, which has issued a steady flow of demands for the overthrow of Mr Musharraf, and local allies. The week before last their target was a former government minister, Aftab Sherpao. He survived a suicide attack on a mosque, but 50 others died. This year, there have been dozens of similar bloody attacks, largely against the military and police, displaying highly sophisticated capability and intelligence. Responsibility for the attempted assassination of Mr Sherpao was claimed, unusually, by a new organisation called Tehreek Taliban-i Pakistan, which is an attempt to unite the Taliban-inspired groups operating in the country. In short, the Pakistani version of the Taliban has fused with al-Qa'ida.

Benazir Bhutto had promised that if she was elected prime minister, she would have allowed Nato forces to strike across the border against al-Qa'ida and its tribal allies. This clearly made her a target for the extremists, and the attack on her bore all their hallmarks. Yet Pakistan has always been a country where political trust is absent, inflammatory rhetoric is commonplace and conspiracy theories reign supreme.

In this atmosphere, many were sceptical about the government's claim that telephone intercepts showed Baitullah Mehsud, a tribal militant operating from the lawless South Waziristan area, had ordered the killing. He was said to have called afterwards to congratulate those immediately in charge of the operation; a spokesman for the militant leader denied it.

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

main target of the explosions. The Inter-Services Intelligence organisation, often accused of uncover 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.

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, Amin Fahim, 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 in 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 Sanam, the only surviving child of Zulfikar, has always avoided political involvement. There are other people in



public life with the name of Bhutto, but they are estranged by the tangled history of the family.

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, unchanged.

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.

What is clear is that it is not

possible to campaign normally any more public gatherings are just too dangerous. But without rallies and meetings, many would contend that any election lacked legitimacy. The government, aware that the US has been pressing for an election to legitimise its "war on terror", has been insisting that it will go ahead, but many believe it is waiting for street violence to die down before announcing a postponement. It is holding consultations with the political parties, in the hope that they will sanction the decision and avoid the appearance of authoritarianism.

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 doffed his uniform only this month, has taken care to put close associates in key positions.

Some troops have already been deployed in Pakistan's major cities, however, to quell the violence triggered by Ms Bhutto's assassination, and there are suggestions that any further unrest could take the country back to the imposition of martial law.

Last month, President Musharraf handed over control of the 500,000-strong army to General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani. He is widely admired as a professional soldier with no obvious political ambitions, and is favoured by Washington. He is said to want to pull the army out of politics and restore some of its damaged reputation.

But as President Musharraf's future looks increasingly uncertain, Pakistan's chief sponsors may begin to explore other options.

The US could greenlight a temporary army takeover with the

provision that elections are held as soon as order is restored. President Musharraf, widely considered a source of instability, would be removed. And Gen Kayani would step in with the promise of free and fair elections in a matter of months. In Pakistan's troubled history, this would be nothing new. After the street demonstrations of 1968 that called for the end of military dictatorship, Field Marshal Ayub Khan was asked to step aside and his deputy, Gen Yahya Khan took over. In 1970, he presided over Pakistan's first truly democratic election, and one still considered its fairest.

But many generals have taken power in a military coup and promised a quick return to democracy. Gen Zia ul-Haq, Pakistan's longest-serving dictator, said he intended to hold elections within "90 days". He stayed for 11 years. And Gen 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 her periods 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 she has always shunned politics. Her teenage daughter Azadi is regarded as equally unlikely to take up the family mantle.

Fatima Bhutto 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 PM. But Fatima has joined Benazir's mourners, possibly signalling a return to the fold.

Courtesy: The Independent, UK.

## Benazir's security was lax

ANEES JILLANI

BENAZIR 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 gate. 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 mediemen 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 ground to be filled.

Her speech was preceded by the major candidates from this region making speeches and she then took the mike.

I have heard many of her speeches and this was perhaps one of her finest, not in terms of the content but for her exemplary delivery. She mostly talked about her father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and his achievements and ostensibly avoided dwelling on the current political situation in the country. She particularly avoided criticising

President Musharraf.

She did not name any of her opponents by name but instead called them "political orphans". She sounded and genuinely appeared very happy.

She finished her speech, quickly got off the stage and sat in her Land Cruiser. The security was good within the premises and nobody was allowed to enter without being frisked and passing through a scanning machine. The assassin, however, approached Benazir's vehicle when it left the Liaquat Bagh precincts and came on to College Road across Gordon College.

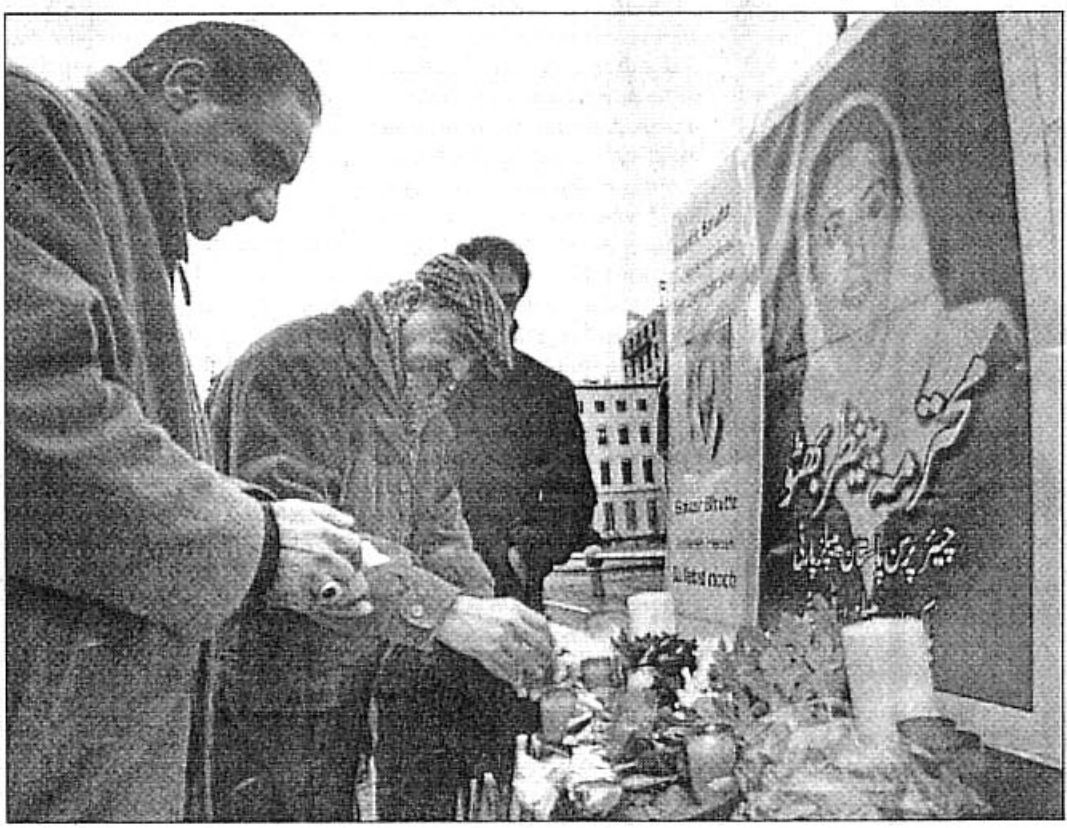
It was then that the suicide bomber approached her and struck the fatal blow. The car carrying Benazir left, without anyone knowing as to what had happened to her. Many of those associated with Benazir's security and the relevant government functionaries may say that suicide bombing cannot be completely avoided. It is an altogether different question as to where these bombers receive their ammunition and training and why have we so far been unable to catch a single mastermind of these attacks.

However, Benazir did not die from the bombing but probably of gunshot wounds. And the strategy adopted by her security staff to

surround her with Benazir Janesars was obviously not effective and kind of cruel.

It at least appeared to me that the police, most of which had come from other cities for some unknown reason, was alert at 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.



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 dazed.

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 his uniform.

The tragic part is that the police was not there to help the people lift the injured and the dead bodies. This was either being done by civilians or later by the ambulance crew who immediately started reaching the place but it took them about an hour and a half to clear the whole area. The police should be asked to lend a helping hand in such endeavours, or is their task simply limited to cordoning off areas?

One police officer had drawn a circle with his stick around the head of the alleged bomber and was hysterically and repeatedly abusing the bomber's sister. Sometimes it appears to me that an evil force has drawn a circle around our beloved country as well.

Benazir, however, left the Land of the Pure happily as she was euphoric in her last moments and was happy with her last public rally and her speech. She died happily but left her nation in a shock that will take decades to shake off.

© Dawn. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Arrangement.