

Pakistan crisis deepens in wake of Murtaza Bhutto assassination

by Susan Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

The assassination of Murtaza Bhutto, the last living brother of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, by a posse of policemen in broad daylight, in front of the Bhutto family home in Karachi on Sept. 20, bodes danger in the coming days for the government. For some time under the gun, the grieving prime minister has warned her party supporters of a brewing conspiracy against her government and attempts to "derail democracy." Speaking before political supporters on Sept. 26 in the capital, Islamabad, Bhutto said that a conspiracy had been hatched against her government and the Bhutto family. "My brother was killed in a pre-planned manner," she said.

Although she did not spell out clearly where the conspiracy was hatched and who the forces of intrigue are, a series of events that occurred almost simultaneously with his murder may provide a clue. A fresh outbreak of sectarian riots in Punjab and the North West Frontier Province between Sunnis and Shias, on one hand, and the Taliban swarming into Kabul, from the Pakistani side of Afghanistan, on the other, show the extent of geopolitical turmoil in the immediate area.

One thing is certain: Various circles in London are already counting the days to her demise. The London *Times*, the semi-official outlet of the British Foreign Office, lectured on Sept. 25: "Pakistan is exhausted by Benazir Bhutto. No elected leader has been more unpopular since the state was founded in 1947. Nor has any political spouse had a reputation as low as that of Asif Zardari, her ever-smiling husband." Implying that Bhutto ordered the murder of her brother, from whom she was estranged, the *Times* cheerfully notes that no matter who killed Murtaza Bhutto, "the implications for Miss Bhutto are grave. . . . In professing her innocence, Miss Bhutto has effectively admitted that she has no control over her murderous country."

Building pressures

Murtaza Bhutto's murder is but the latest episode in a building of pressures against Pakistan and its prime minister, who has worked to bring Pakistan into closer relations with the United States:

- The late-August rejection of the fourth tranche of the loan by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) led to a 3.65% devaluation of the Pakistani rupee in September. The rupee, which is still sliding, is expected to lose another 10% by

December. More pressure comes from Western sources expressing their displeasure at gross economic mismanagement and corruption in the country. "Bhutto's economic team has lost credibility," one Western diplomat told newsmen. Pakistan needs to find about \$1 billion by the end of October to meet \$670 million worth of foreign debt repayments and to run the administration. There is no telling where the money will come from. With foreign exchange reserves at only \$1.7 billion, and falling, Prime Minister Bhutto's regime has been virtually abandoned by all financial institutions.

In September, Bhutto accused the World Bank, especially its Pakistan-born officials, of urging the Pakistanis to convert their currency to dollars, creating a run on the rupee. Bhutto, pressured by the IMF-World Bank and her advisers, had imposed an additional \$1.2 billion in taxes and abandoned subsidies on fuel, electricity and medicine, pushing the cost of medicines up to among the highest in the developing countries.

Shahid Javed Burki, a Pakistan-born vice president of the World Bank and a committed promoter of the IMF-World Bank snake-oil remedies for the Pakistani economy, said recently: "Pakistan's fiscal imbalances cannot be sustained at their present level for much longer."

- The introduction of the fresh taxes into the June budget has led to a series of strikes since, further bruising the Bhutto regime. On July 21, transport workers called a nationwide strike, and on the same day, the strike called by a 14-party opposition alliance, led by former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, brought commerce and trade to a halt in Sindh province, the home province of the Bhuttos, whose capital is Karachi. In Islamabad, government clerks were on hunger strike in protest against rising prices.

- Soon after Murtaza Bhutto's assassination, President Farooq Leghari, a personal friend, handpicked by Benazir Bhutto, asked both Houses of Parliament to consider streamlining accountability in public life. The President's objective, as he spelled it out, is to find a middle road between the "divergent views of the government and the opposition on the question of rooting out corruption from the public domain." The most significant constitutional aspect of President Leghari's formula is that appointments to the designated Special Courts for probity in public life should be made by the Presi-

dent, in “consultation” with the prime minister, the leader of the opposition, and the chief justice of the Supreme Court—a Presidential appointee. The President has also presented a mechanism to appoint a special prosecutor or ombudsman who would investigate, refer, and prosecute all cases before these Special Courts.

President Leghari’s strident voice, which clearly indicates a shift in his allegiance, is ostensibly related to a recent controversy over allegations that the prime minister’s husband, Asif Ali Zardari, has bought a multimillion-dollar mansion in the suburbs of London.

- Pakistan is regularly rocked by sectarian clashes between Shias and Sunnis. These conflicts have been largely instigated by the Anjuman-e-Sipah-i-Sahaba of Zia Rehman Farooqi. In early 1995, Farooqi went on a month-long tour of Britain, looking for money and recruits, claiming afterward that he had gained 40,000 recruits at rallies throughout England. On Aug. 18, masked gunmen opened fire on a Shia procession in a village near Multan in Punjab province. Eighteen people, including three of the gunmen, were killed, and another 50 injured. On the same day, three powerful explosions blew up an Army compound in Lahore, destroying some 20 trucks.

In mid-September, sectarian clashes between Shias and Sunnis in the Kurram agency in the North West Frontier Province, which borders Afghanistan, claimed more than 100 lives. The use of mortars and missiles indicates that both sects are heavily armed and the conflict has become endemic. On Sept. 24, twenty-one Sunni worshippers were mowed down in a mosque in Multan. Subsequently, gunmen shot and killed Qamrul Hussain, an area chief of the Shiite Tehreek-e-Jafriya Pakistan (TJP) in Haroonabad, Punjab. Most of Punjab province is now gripped with the fear of a full-fledged, open sectarian conflict. Aside from the terrorist escalation within the country, the Sunni-Shia strife is believed to be part of an effort to create tensions between Iran and Pakistan.

Earlier, on July 22, a blast at Lahore’s international airport killed six people and injured more than 50. Although in all at least 200 people have been killed in 22 blasts over the last five months or so, the Lahore airport blast set in motion an alliance of 14 parties demanding the ouster of the Bhutto regime. The meeting to launch the movement took place in Islamabad on July 24. The alliance comprises many groups who disagree on various issues, but their hatred for Bhutto and her Pakistan People’s Party cements them together.

Bhutto’s government, which sought help of U.S. experts to investigate the Lahore airport bombing, has blamed the religious parties for carrying out subversive activities in the country. The Bhutto government has also arrested a large number of people belonging to various religious groups crossing into Afghanistan.

Why Murtaza Bhutto was killed

In contrast to the vicious reactionary sectarian killings

in the North West Frontier Province and Punjab, and ethnic killings in Sindh involving Mohajirs and Sindhis, the assassination of Murtaza Bhutto did not spark any major flare-up, even in Sindh, the family’s home province. Murtaza Bhutto, who was leading an insignificant breakaway faction from the PPP called the Shaheed Bhutto Committee, had been virtually marginalized in his political endeavors. None of the major opposition parties had shown any interest in attracting him.

The murder bears all the earmarks of an assassination; the senior police official, Haq Nawaz Siyal, a key policeman accused of faking his injuries during the alleged shoot-out in which Murtaza Bhutto was killed, was found shot in his home with a single bullet through the head. While the government quickly declared the death a suicide, his wife claimed that she saw two masked men fleeing over the wall of their house, moments after she heard the fatal gunshot.

However, Murtaza Bhutto, whose political differences with his sister centered around his strong displeasure over her close relations to Washington, was vulnerable to various intelligence operations, which abound within Pakistan. Pakistani officials claim that he was in close touch with Indian intelligence, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). That, however, could not possibly be the reason behind his assassination.

Murtaza Bhutto’s supporters accused both the prime minister and her husband in the aftermath of the killing. Benazir Bhutto’s mother, Nusrat Bhutto, who has now buried her husband, former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and both her sons, was bewildered by the murder and refused to pin the blame on her daughter or the Zardari family.

It is far more likely, however, that the murder was a warning to Bhutto herself from forces now committed to removing her from the scene. In various periods of her administration, particularly in early 1995 and at various points this year, the Bhutto government, working with U.S. law enforcement agencies, has acted to arrest the various “Afghansi” and drug operations plaguing Pakistan, and also using Pakistan or contiguous centers in Afghanistan as a base. This has brought Bhutto at various times into direct confrontation London, since, as the *EIR Special Report* “New Terror International Targets South Asia,” (Oct. 13, 1995), documented, many of the terrorist operations targeting Pakistan find safehaven, funds, and recruiting grounds in Britain. Bhutto has repeatedly sought the extradition of Mohajir Quam Movement leader Altaf Hussein from England, from where he runs the MQM low-intensity war against the government in the Sindh province.

The Taliban conquest of Kabul, the endemic Shia-Sunni violence, endless ethnic clashes in Sindh, the financial collapse and further shrinking of the Pakistani economy, and the strident voice of President Farooq Leghari, all seem to point to a reorganization of power—a reorganization dictated from outside the country.