

Long Playing Tragedy

Benazir Bhutto's assassination marks another sad and volatile chapter in South Asia that is likely to be misunderstood here and elsewhere.

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History is cruel to those who lack the abilities to learn from its lessons.

Despite the worst nightmare scenarios predicted, despite the earlier ghastly attempts on her life, despite the deceptions, the back-room dealings and the public pretensions, Benazir Bhutto has met a tragic end. The first woman leader of the Muslim world, and the second top-ranked woman leader in a South Asian country, has been tragically assassinated.

This event either extends the tragedies of the Indian subcontinent, or it opens up a new, brutal era where it does not matter if you are a woman or a man, optimistic or autocratic, a proven deceiver or a charismatic leader - your end could be marked by the age of terror, revenge and instability.

The early reports don't quite tell us who was behind her assassination, but it has all the marks of a calculated assault, reminiscent of similar targeted violence against Mahatma Gandhi, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi in India. Then there are several of these violent events in Pakistan: the air crash of Zia ul Haq toward the end of the war in Soviet-Afghanistan, the execution of Benazir's father, the colorful and bombastic Zulfikar Ali Bhutto years earlier. Bhutto's other family members suffered violent ends: the murders of her two brothers - Murtazza's at the hands of suspected rivals and Shahnawaz's apparent non-political killing in his apartment in Paris.



Benazir Bhutto at her last public appearance in Rawalpindi, minutes before her assassination.

The recent return of Benazir Bhutto to Pakistan was tainted with suspicion and hope. Already steeped in corruption (along with her husband), she was somehow a cut above the infamy that accompanied another returnee to Pakistan's elections in January, the former Prime Minister Nawaz Shariff. With her Western (especially Oxford) pedigree, she was said to have managed her return with the tacit approval of the U. S. State Department.

Indeed, if some of the speculations and gossip in the U.S. are to be believed, nothing could happen in Pakistan without the explicit consent of the powers that be in Washington, D.C. She wrote editorials in U.S. newspapers explaining why she was returning, made herself available to the American media before and after her return and there was constant chatter of back-door dealings with Musharraf.

Yet, there was some hope in all of this.

Some believed that she could at least restore some stability in the public sphere while the army took care of its real business. Improbable, but there was hope. With her face on something called "democracy" in Pakistan, it was likely that she would make things "normal" in a place that seems to bear all signs of chaos and disorder.

All that is gone with what seems like a targeted assassination by a suicide bomber. If you hear the presidential hopefuls and the talking heads in this country, there is the usual chatter and scripted pronouncements about the strategic importance of Pakistan to the United States, worries about the security of nuclear weapons and lip service to how things could be straightened out.

In South Asia, the same story has gripped the sub-continent for some time: extreme actions beget extreme reactions, out of the ordinary emerges the extraordinary and political assassinations follow rampant mob violence and wounds that never heal.

For India, the question of stability across the border is even more crucial. Disorder in Pakistan could make porous borders even more active. Trainees could move around in India to test their skills in terror before moving to the theater of declared enemies.



Distraught supporter at the spot where Benazir Bhutto was assassinated.

Not everything is a cricket match. People's lives in the two countries are mediated by powerful interests, even though their cultures and histories are shared. The deep enmities and suspicions could well trigger something worse or at the least impose a heavy demand on resources in India. And with truly active global strategic interests, there is China, a major player in that area.

None of this figures in political analysis in the U.S. There is just a generic war on terror and some dictators are our own bastards, who we need to protect, and some are not, so we hang them. Everyone else who has nuclear power is immature and unreliable while ours is fortified and positioned against "evil."

Simplicity marches on as political policy while the world grows complex and dangerous.

Bhutto's death may precipitate crises on several fronts. She was a charismatic woman

leader in South Asia, which has had its share of elected women leaders. She dared to put herself in the front of crises, much the same way that Indira Gandhi bedeviled her demons. She was oddly bold and at the center in an otherwise dogmatic and sexist region.

And yet, there is a lot to learn from women leaders like her: for men who suspect women's leadership and for women who cannot extend their faith in their own abilities. She was a clumsy and shy, but pampered girl, going to Oxford and attempting to live through her celebrity life. Power made her grow up, just as it did Indira Gandhi and Hillary Clinton. There were times she appeared completely Westernized, entirely unfit to be the leader in a Muslim country. She never even mastered Urdu, something her countrymen pointed out and poked fun at until recently. But she knew how to steer and use charm and skills with the masses. Her political bent was never clear, but she appeared to be skillful in playing the part. She had talent of her own kind, no matter what her political shortcomings.

Her death, under these circumstances, marks another sad and volatile chapter in South Asia that is likely to be misunderstood here and elsewhere. If we think of justice, it would be appropriate to remember where she came from and what her promise was. And for a moment, let us express lament about this world and subcontinent that is so violent toward its women leaders.

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