

## **Interview with Pervez Hoodbhoy**

### **Who do you think is behind the assassination of Benazir Bhutto?**

There are different possibilities. But some facts are certain. There definitely were gunshots, and this was followed by a suicide blast. Now, I do not think that suicide bombers can be bought with any number of rupees. Only a religious fanatic lured by heavenly rewards would blow himself up. Therefore Al-Qaida, the Taliban, or other Islamic jihadist groups are strong possibilities. They always hated Bhutto, but even more after she announced in Washington that, if elected prime minister, she would fight them even more vigorously than Musharraf. Of course, rogue elements of Pakistan's intelligence agencies, who are also strong Islamists, and who lie deeply hidden within the establishment, could also have done it. They have a stock of suicide bombers available to them, as evidenced by the success they have had in organizing suicide attacks upon army commandos as well as their own colleagues.

So did Islamists of one or the other flavour do it? Maybe, but the waters have been muddied by the government. First, publicly available photographs and videos show a modern-looking gunman accompanying the suicide bomber. He fired three shots, heard by all present, at least one of which hit Bhutto. On the other hand, the government insisted she died from concussion and not a bullet wound – an obvious lie immediately refuted by those in the same car as Bhutto. Second, in just an hour after the assassination, municipal workers and the police washed away all the bloody evidence with water hoses. So, it is quite possible that non-Islamists in the government have somehow used brainwashed suicide bombers, trained in mosques and madrassas, to do their dirty job. But, as in the JFK murder, the truth will never be known.

### **Who gains the most from the death of Bhutto?**

Many have gained. Islamist groups saw her as a tool of America that would be used against them, and a leader who could secularize Pakistan. Plus, she was a woman and popular. But Musharraf and his political party, the PML(Q), have also gained because a political rival has been eliminated.

### **Is the killing of Bhutto in any way linked to the Lal Masjid incident?**

Not in any direct way. But the criminally stupid way in which Lal Masjid was handled by the Musharraf government led to a violent upsurge of jihadist activities throughout Pakistan. The mullahs became stronger in the aftermath.

### **Do you think the killers or those responsible behind the assassination of Bhutto will be nabbed?**

This is extremely unlikely. The government showed no enthusiasm for providing protection to her in spite of her numerous requests. It destroyed the evidence immediately after the assassination. Then it made a manifestly false claim about the nature of the injury sustained by Bhutto. The government spokesman claimed that the Pakistani Taliban leader, Behtullah Masood, had admitted to the assassination – but he immediately refuted the claim. Musharraf is still blocking an independent international investigation. I

do not say that the government is responsible, but it has certainly behaved very suspiciously and ineptly.

**In Pakistan what is the man on the street thinking?**

Everyone holds the government responsible for the assassination. On the other hand, suicide bombings are not condemned with any particular vigor. There is no strong reaction against the mullahs, madrassas, and jihadis. Perhaps people are afraid to criticize them because this might be seen as a criticism of Islam. Interestingly, in all the street demonstrations after the Bhutto assassinations, there was no call for cracking down on extremists.

**What do you personally think of the late Benazir Bhutto?**

She was courageous and single-minded. And she showed that a woman could be the head of a conservative Islamic state. But it is hard to see what she wanted beyond personal power. She always said that she was fighting for grand causes. But what were they? She certainly did nothing for Pakistani women during her two stints in power. She left untouched the horrific Hudood laws, according to which a rape victim needs to produce 4 witnesses to the act of penetration else she could be punished for fornication. Nor did she try to overturn the Pakistani blasphemy law that prescribes death as the minimum penalty for those convicted of insulting the prophet of Islam or his companions. As for democracy – she had been desperate to do a deal with Musharraf who dangled over her head the many corruption cases that she was charged with. But he proved too clever for her and she was forced into the opposition.

**Bhutto was seen to be sympathetic to India's request to handover criminals staying in Pakistan. How does the killing of Bhutto affect India?**

I do not think that Bhutto would have had a policy towards India substantially different from Musharraf's. In fact, in this particular matter, notwithstanding Kargil, I would credit Musharraf with having substantially improved relations with India. India should take grasp the olive branch – it is to everybody's benefit. It should stop repression in Kashmir and solve this outstanding problem. Peace is what we need on the subcontinent

**People outside Pakistan seem to increasingly perceive it as unsafe and rogue nation. What is your view?**

I think Pakistan could have gone a very different way. Antagonism with India and the Kashmir dispute gave the army an excuse to become the most powerful institution in Pakistan. It started redefining Pakistan according to its own needs. Hence we saw that religion was put above criticism and forced onto people as official policy. Prayers in government departments were deemed compulsory, punishments were meted out to those who did not fast in Ramadan, selection for academic posts required that the candidate demonstrate knowledge of Islamic teachings, and jihad was propagated through schoolbooks. Today government intervention is no longer needed because of a spontaneous groundswell of Islamic zeal. But now the state is realizing that it shot itself in the foot. The fanatical jihadists it created have turned against it. It is supreme irony that the Pakistan Army – whose men were recruited under the banner of jihad and which saw

itself as the fighting arm of Islam – is now frequently targeted by suicide bombers who are fighting a jihad to bring even stricter Islam. It has lost many hundreds of men fighting Al-Qaida and the Taliban.

### **In what direction are things going now?**

The pace of radicalization has quickened. There are almost daily suicide attacks. This phenomenon was almost unknown in Pakistan before the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Now it is common in major cities as well as tribal areas. The targets have been the Pakistan army, police, incumbent and retired government leaders, and rival Islamic sects. But this is just the tip of the iceberg.

Pakistan's tribal areas have undergone a radical transformation. The local Taliban have closed all girls schools and are enforcing Sharia laws in the areas under their control. Barbers have been handed 6-foot long death shrouds – shave and die. Taliban vigilante groups patrol the streets of towns under their control checking, among other things, the length of beards, whether the “shalwars” are worn at an appropriate height above the ankles, and attendance of individuals in the mosques. A new breed of young militants, trained in madrassas, now call the shots. They have displaced the leadership of the traditional village elders, the *maliks*.

### **Why do the Americans continue supporting Musharraf?**

The Americans have tunnel vision. They want lackeys like Musharraf who seem to do their bidding, although here too there is deception at work. They know, but choose to forget, that Pakistani military leaders, Musharraf included, are the makers of the jihadist monster. In 1999, after Musharraf launched the secret Kargil operation in Kashmir, the United Jihad Council celebrated him as a true fighter for Islam. After 911 this praise disappeared, but under his leadership the army still covertly supported jihadist groups and the Taliban in Kashmir and Afghanistan.

Musharraf is extremely unpopular now and the Americans may have to dump him at some point. It is hard to find a pro-Musharraf person anywhere in the country except in the top business circles and the top army leadership. Until recently he ran both the army and the government himself, with the connivance of a rubber-stamp Parliament put in place through rigged elections. When the courts were about to rule that he could not legally be president, Musharraf chose to suspend the constitution and impose emergency rule. He dismissed the Supreme Court and arrested the judges, replacing them with judges who obey his every command. He blocked all independent television channels, and punished the news media for disparaging him or the army. His police arrested thousands of lawyers and pro-democracy activists. He ordered that civilians be tried in closed military courts. This was necessary, he said, to save Pakistan from a rapidly growing Islamist insurgency. But he released 25 Islamic extremists on the day that the judges were arrested. In spite of all this, George W. Bush called Musharraf “a democrat at heart”.

### **What could be an effective way to fight Al Qaeda and the Taleban in Pakistan?**

To fight and win this war, Pakistan will need to mobilize both its people and the state. The notion of a power-sharing agreement between the state and Taliban is a non-starter; the spectacular failures of earlier agreements should be a lesson. Instead the government should help create public consensus through open forum discussions, proceed faster on infrastructure development in the tribal areas, and make judicious use of military force. This should become every Pakistani's war, not just the army's, and it will have to be fought even if America packs up and goes away. But, as long as Musharraf is president, it will be impossible to get popular support for the war. If presented with a choice between Musharraf and the Taliban, the overwhelming majority of Pakistanis would want the latter – although I am sure they would regret it later.

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