

# BHUTTO

Given my well-known complaint with those who have long underplayed the importance of Pakistan in our foreign policy debates, I feel like I have to say something about Bhutto's assassination. But so far, the most intelligent thing I've seen written on Pakistan comes from AmericaBlog's AJ:

The first thing to say about Bhutto's assassination is that any kind of rush to judgment, especially along the lines of impending doom, is probably imprudent.

Unless Musharraf planned this assassination as part of a larger campaign to reimpose his power, I would imagine things are—and will remain—in a state of flux for some time. If Musharraf didn't plan it, only sort of allowed it to happen with inadequate security, and instead Islamic extremists pulled it off, then Musharraf himself may be subject to a lot more pressure from those extremists. But we don't know—and I'm not convinced we'll really know for sure for some time, if ever.

And while AJ warns against seeing this as a collapse into anarchy, it seems clear that Bhutto's assassination devastates our Pakistan policy. Here's AJ again:

In terms of policy implications, this is reflective of a massive US foreign policy blunder, in that the Bush administration, in a monumentally stupid move, shoved Bhutto down the throat of Musharraf (and the rest of Pakistan) as a savior, despite her lack of broad popular support and general reputation as corrupt. In making someone who didn't necessarily have the ability to deliver the savior for democracy in Pakistan, we simultaneously set up our own policy to fail and offered Musharraf a return to

(or continued) total power in the event that our little power-sharing arrangement didn't work. We also – though not only us – painted a big fat target on her back. Really a debacle all the way around.

And here's Robin Wright and Glenn Kessler in the WaPo:

But the diplomacy that ended abruptly with Bhutto's assassination yesterday was always an enormous gamble, according to current and former U.S. policymakers, intelligence officials and outside analysts. By entering into the legendary "Great Game" of South Asia, the United States also made its goals and allies more vulnerable – in a country in which more than 70 percent of the population already looked unfavorably upon Washington.

Bhutto's assassination leaves Pakistan's future – and Musharraf's – in doubt, some experts said. "U.S. policy is in tatters. The administration was relying on Benazir Bhutto's participation in elections to legitimate Musharraf's continued power as president," said Barnett R. Rubin of New York University. "Now Musharraf is finished."

And here's Chris Nelson (via Steve Clemons):

Flawed as she was, Ms. Bhutto was really the only "candidate" the US had with the capacity to make and enforce some kind of a deal with Musharraf, and to set in motion a return to something resembling normal political life and liberalization. Right now, US policy is in shambles.

Though to be more exact, I think it safe to say Condi's policy is in shambles. Which suggests

that, short of unquestioning support for Musharraf led by the Dick Cheney faction in the Administration, the US is going to have an increasingly difficult time influencing the future of Pakistan at precisely the time when the situation may grow more chaotic. And in a panic to sustain whatever stability possible in Pakistan, we may well see Cheney's foreign policy approach regain ascendancy in this Administration. Though what that means if this was indeed an Al Qaeda attack, with or without the complicity of pro-extremist members of the military and intelligence services, I don't know. If Al Qaeda did pull off this dramatic attack, and if the attack leads in some way toward Musharraf consolidating his power (or at least cracking down definitively on opposition), then unquestioning support of him is the last thing, it seems, that we ought to be doing. That is, a Cheney scenario may lead us, once again, to funnel uncontrolled dollars into the hands of our enemies.

That said, one of the most interesting possibilities—though this has to be a long-shot—is that Bhutto's party will find a way to mature from the charismatic party it has always been and develop into something more robust. David Rohde suggests that Aitzaz Ahsan is one name being considered to replace Bhutto as head of her party.

Also being mentioned Thursday night as a possible new party chief was Aitzaz Ahsan, the prominent leader of the lawyers' movement. Mr. Ahsan was jailed after the Nov. 3 state of emergency was imposed and remains under house arrest.

Mr. Ahsan is an articulate, Cambridge-educated lawyer and a forceful critic of the Musharraf government. But he had a rocky relationship with Ms. Bhutto. According to several members of the party, she resented his high profile as the leader of the campaign to reinstate the chief justice, Iftikhar Muhammad

Chaudhry, after he was fired earlier this year.

Alternately, the experts Nelson cites spin a best-case scenario in which the "lawyers revolt" can adopt the mantle of moderate opposition.

Our experts say if some semblance of order can be restored, and something resembling a real election scheduled, and held, perhaps former caretaker Prime Minister Qureshi. . .or, more likely, Chief Justice Chaudhry, fired by Musharraf. . .may gain mass public support as an alternative to military rule.

Recall that Chaudhry's sacking, which set off the dramatic "lawyers revolt", saw well-dressed professionals in the streets. . .by the thousands. It was seen at the time as "the collapse of the center" which might herald a collapse of the Musharraf regime.

Of course, those are both pipe dream scenarios and the US will have very little influence over whether they could happen. Which given the clusterfuck that is the Bush foreign policy, may well be a good thing.