

Why Mrs. Bhutto had to die

Contributed by Washington Times
Monday, 31 December 2007

By Walid Phares - Former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto was murdered because of her potential actions in Pakistan, by the combined forces of jihadism in that country. In short, they executed her to pre-empt her future war of ideas. This was the bottom line and here is why.

The long-term plan of the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan during the 1990s was to eventually spread to Pakistan and seize power, and, ultimately after 1999, to seize the nukes, too. Miscalculating on September 11, Osama bin Laden lost Kabul and the jihadi war room crossed into their eastern neighbor. Plan B was then to seize Waziristan and gradually Talibanize the country, grabbing the "doomsday" devices in the end. For the last seven years, the jihadi hydra protected by the fundamentalist tribes, hooking up with the local Islamist movements and with tentacles deep inside the defense and intelligence apparatus, attempted to spread in that direction. President Pervez Musharraf, unable to determine the extent of radical influence in his own services, moved slowly and reluctantly on the containment strategies. This lost time resulted in several assassination attempts and allowed a widening of the jihadi networks in the country. Reacting to the breach of national security, he tightened the rope on the opposition, frustrating his secular opponents and alienating the nation's Supreme Court.

The descent into generalized violence was spiraling out of his government's control and working to al Qaeda's satisfaction. Both bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, as well as Taliban leader Mullah Omar, acting as jihadi supreme rulers of the country, pressed on with calls for assassination and fatwas for regime change. By 2006, Mr. Musharraf was fighting on two fronts: taking on the jihadi forces, including the homegrown ones on the one hand; and dealing with the pressures from his secular opposition on the other hand. From early 2007, as Taliban operatives based in enclaves in the border areas continued to strike inside Afghanistan, al Qaeda's messages beaming out of Pakistan and violence were unrestrained. The United States pressed Mr. Musharraf to change direction.

The advice from Washington (which was endorsed by the West and not opposed by moderate Muslim countries) urged the general (who was also serving as president) to: 1) open up to the opposition and allow the exiles to come back to the country, despite sour past relations; 2) hold general elections and welcome a new democratically elected cabinet; 3) relinquish his command of the armed forces if elected president; and 4) launch an all-out military campaign against Pakistan's Taliban.

Reading the map accurately, Mr. Musharraf heeded almost all suggestions. He allowed former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto to return and head her large party, although he made it more difficult for her colleague, Nawaz Sharif — Mr. Musharraf's direct political enemy — to proceed as swiftly in his return to the political scene. Mr. Musharraf announced a general legislative election slated initially for next month. He was re-elected as president by the current legislature and resigned from the top military office. And last but not least, he indeed sent several divisions to the frontier valleys to battle the terrorists on their own turf. But by changing direction, he opened a Pandora's box for his government and for the political process he freed.

Former political enemies weren't smooth on reconciling: While Mrs. Bhutto began negotiating with Mr. Musharraf, demanding a purge in the military, Mr. Sharif called for Mr. Musharraf's resignation. In addition, the president of the high court refused to recognize the general's election as president. These turbulences triggered frustrations among the military as it was marching to confront the most lethal enemy in the North-West region. And taking advantage of this dizzying political storm, the jihadi forces launched their urban offensive culminating with the suicidal Red Mosque intifada in Islamabad in the summer. And as Mr. Musharraf was steering the wheels toward political reconfiguration, terror attacks targeted various cities as well as military personnel across the country.

But the return of Mrs. Bhutto to Pakistan sent a positive message to the public and a negative one to the radical Islamists. The daughter of a prominent leader, a member of a political family, a former prime minister in her own right — and, above all, a liberal Muslim woman — Mrs. Bhutto projected the possibility of a leap toward more balanced politics and greater steps toward pluralism — two ingredients for progress toward democracy. Her dialogue with Mr. Musharraf made possible the return of Mr. Sharif and the global march to new elections. The bickering politicians didn't let go of their sour feelings toward each other, but the political process was about to gradually return to the country.

The prospect of the January elections would be good for all parties. The president would be proving that his institutions are solidly democratic, thus legitimizing his own office. The opposition would gain the seats it needed to access the

cabinet or become powerbrokers at the assembly. Mrs. Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party was projected to be the largest bloc, and through a coalition in parliament, she was to become the next prime minister of this powerful Muslim country. That is precisely why she was murdered.

Indeed, the greatest losers in the upcoming elections, and in any democratic elections mobilizing large and experienced secular forces, would be the Islamists. Their six-party coalition achieved legislative power because of the absence of the secular and democratic forces. Now that Mr. Musharraf isn't in love with the jihadi forces anymore, several assassination attempts later; and after the seculars saw with their naked eyes what the fundamentalists were preparing for the country, the slice of Islamist vote was projected to shrink.

Mrs. Bhutto was the reason for this future political defeat. But beyond these political considerations, it was a war of ideas that the Taliban and their ilk feared the most. It is one thing for the radicals to measure themselves in comparison with the military's authoritarianism. But it is another thing to be blasted ideologically by a woman who would dominate Pakistan's politics. By jihadi standards it was unbearable to see Lady Benazir seizing the premiership of the executive power. A staunch modernist and a genuine Muslim, she would have been their worst nightmare. With her in power, forget about the Talibanization: There would be no suppression of women and no brutalization of minorities. There would be fierce empowerment of civil society. This is why the combined "war room" of al Qaeda, the neo-Taliban and the Pakistani jihadists decided to eliminate her.

In October, Baitullah Mehsud, a Taliban commander in South Waziristan, threatened to kill Mrs. Bhutto upon her return. Mrs. Bhutto was aware of the Taliban and al Qaeda threats but dismissed them. At a press conference in Dubai in November Mrs. Bhutto said "she did not fear 'militants and extremists,' acknowledging that Afghan and Arab militants as well as those of the Red Mosque had threatened her," Dawn TV reported. "She said that threats to her life had been whipped up to 'intimidate me and the people of Pakistan.' " She added, "I don't believe that a true Muslim will attack me. I believe Islam forbids suicide bombings." But the jihadists had previously tried to assassinate her in a prior bombing as she returned to Pakistan in October.

Since then, as she criticized Mr. Musharraf for his political failures, the state of emergency and her house arrest, Mrs. Bhutto nevertheless relentlessly attacked the "radical Islamists," whom she accused of terror and oppression. In those days between the first attempt and her slaughter on Thursday, Mrs. Bhutto acted as the single most influential, courageous and symbolic female leader in the Muslim world. She was waging a war of ideas on her own in the most dangerous jihadi environment on the planet. Had she survived to win the legislative elections, she would have become the most efficient Muslim prime minister in the war against the terrorists.

Benazir Bhutto was stepping into a hornets' nest with her face uncovered. She was executed by the Taliban in a manner that was almost frighteningly reminiscent of the massacre of Afghan women who refused to wear the burka. Now it is up to her party, her followers and her allies to pick up the struggle from where she fell and move forward with her legacy. They need to focus on the greater goal of salvaging democracy by uniting their efforts with the president to hold these elections against all odds, even at a different date, and to back their national army in a global effort to defeat the terrorists.

Pakistan is crossing a dangerous path, but the security stakes are the highest in the world, obviously because of the nuclear weapons. The assassination of Mrs. Bhutto has also another apocalyptic dimension. Since November 2001, bin Laden has revealed that the ultimate goal of al Qaeda is to claim what "is theirs," i.e. the atomic power of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Many jihadi leaders have since asserted the duty to equip the caliphate to come with the most powerful armaments in the world. The gradual advance of the Taliban into their eastern neighbor is aimed at reaching those nukes: Either they would infiltrate the intelligence agencies and the army or they would take advantage of chaos and collapse. The attempts to kill Mr. Musharraf and the assassination of Mrs. Bhutto converge into one thread, a maximum violence leading to a coup d'etat by their supporters inside the military. Once the cataclysmic scenario was achieved, the rest is left to dark imagination.

Armed with such devastating power, the suicidal jihadists will have an open field for their missiles, which could target India and the U.S. presence in the region, as well as Europe and the Russian hinterland. Eventually even China would be at their mercy. The alibis are endless as long as there are "infidels" to confront. Hence the world after such a day cannot function peacefully. Because of such an intolerable possibility, Washington, Brussels, Moscow, New Delhi and Beijing, as we speak, should be readying the world for such threats.

Article published Dec 31, 2007, The Washington Times

Walid Phares is director of the Future Terrorism Project at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and a visiting scholar at the European Foundation for Democracy.

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20071231/EDITORIAL/622390676/1013/EDITORIAL>