

Issue in Focus:

Benazir Bhutto, two-time elected Prime Minister (PM) of Pakistan, was assassinated on December 27, 2007 after she had addressed a public rally in Rawalpindi's Liaqat Bagh. Reportedly, two assailants attacked her motorcade when she was on her way out. According to many reports, one shot her while the other one blew himself up. As of December 31, 2007, the total death toll stands at 27 while 17 people are still injured. She was the Chairperson of Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which taken to be the only national mainstream left-of-center political party. Her death sparked nationwide protests and violence, particularly in Sindh and Punjab. Her death also highlighted the deep political divide and the sense of disenchantment among the people of Pakistan's Sindh province as they changed anti Punjab, province where BB was assassinated, and anti Pakistan slogans soon after her death and burial the subsequent day.

Background:

BB, before she had planned to come to Pakistan had expressed her concerns about the security situation in Pakistan and on more than one occasion, she referred to the growing extremism militancy and has said: "we are prepared to risk our lives but we will not surrender our great nation to the militants." Not only she criticized the elements behind the growing extremism in Pakistan Northern and North-Western regions but she also lashed on the government for "not doing enough" to tackle the extremist trends, which, according to many political observers, had already started making inroads in the mainland Pakistan. BB ended her exile on October 18, 2007 and returned to Pakistan. She landed in Karachi and was leading a public rally when two bomb blasts short past midnight in Karachi's Cantonment killed nearly 152 people and injured close to 500. The government announced that it was a suicide bombing and did not register the case on the request of PPP. PPP alleged three government functionaries, including the Director General of Pakistan's civilian Intelligence Bureau, Brig. Retired Ijaz Shah and the then sitting Punjab Chief Minister, Chaudhary Pervez Ilahi. Allegations against Ilahi were withdrawn subsequently but strong suspicions continued against Brig. Shah. Party also demanded his removal from the position. BB, addressing a public rally in Larkana, her hometown, on December 23 said that: "government has failed to combat militancy...(and)...they always try to stop democratic forces but don't make any effort to check extremists, terrorists and fanatics."

Two weeks after the assassination attempt, she wrote at CNN's website: "The sham investigation of the October 19 massacre and the attempt by the ruling party to politically capitalize on this catastrophe are discomfoting." In an email message to an American lobbyist, who she had known for a long time, she named three people who would be responsible if she would be killed.

According to media reports, a militant leader in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Baitullah Mehsood, also threatened her before her arrival with suicide bombings as he perceived her as the "puppet of the West," particularly, the US. According to a report in LA Times on December 30, the American Embassy had also been sharing with her the sensitive information pertaining to her security and she had already requested the government for tight and heavy security. Government provided her with the security but neither the party nor she herself was

satisfied. On December 25, media reported a statement by BB's Security Advisor, Rahman Malik, that security arrangements for BB were not "enough and government has not given us the jammers despite having requested them three times." Two days after the statement appeared, she was assassinated.

Details:

The government on December 29, 2007 claimed that she was not shot dead but after the bomb explosion, a lever in the sun-roof shield hit her head causing a "depressed fracture" that killed her. The government also released a video footage that did not really show her head hitting the lever as the shockwave and the commotion of the bomb blast barred from filming the moment but only a day after the release of the official video, a Pakistani private TV channel, showed in slow motion a hand with a gun pointed in her direction from within the crowd around her vehicle. Later on December 30, 2007, BBC showed another clip from a different angle where BB is shown getting hit and falling to her right before the explosion happened. The party immediately rejected the government's version of the incident and BB's husband told the media that he himself and his sister, who is a doctor, herself saw the wound in BB's head. The initial report of the doctor also pointed that BB was killed because of a wound that hit her head and a bullet had also hit her in her back. The medical report that the government released was different and the PPP said it was manipulated and changed. PPP Secretary Information, Sherry Rahman, also rejected the government's claim and said that she herself saw the wound. Sherry was in the same vehicle with BB.

Situation Analysis:

BB's death has infuriated the Pakistani masses, especially the Sindh people, where the BB belonged to. There has been a breakdown of government's authority and State's writ in the interior parts of Sindh, parts of Karachi and central and northern parts of Punjab. Government has assessed the total damage and loss to the public and private property at 50-55 billion rupees. More than 60 railway coaches, 30 banks, 15 post offices, over a hundred private vehicles and 35 government buildings were burnt in protest against BB's killing. The Sindh provincial government had to call in para-military forces and military in the troubled 11 districts of Sindh with orders to "shoot to kill." PPP has announced to take part in elections and another opposition party, Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz Group) has also announced to reverse its earlier decision to boycott the upcoming elections. All the opposition groups are looking forward to contest elections on January 8, 2008 while the previously ruling party, Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid-e-Azam Group) has suggested elections be postponed by "10 to 12 weeks," the party's Additional Secretary Information, Senator Tariq Azeem Khan said. PPP has appointed Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, son of Benazir Bhutto as the Chairman and his father, Asif Ali Zardari as the Co-Chairman of the party. Bilawal cannot contest in this and the next election but the party preferred to follow the of managing political parties on hereditary model to primarily take maximum political benefit in the coming elections. Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), who independence and credibility is often questioned, has expressed inability to hold elections in the troubled districts of Sindh and a high powered meeting will be held on January 1, 2008 to review the situation. The

opposition parties have already demanded that the army and rangers should be called to ensure law and order and security on the Election Day. Pakistan's political opposition suspects that PML-Q and President Musharraf are trying to find ways to delay the elections. As of December 31, 2007, many world leaders, including the US and British dignitaries have urged President Musharraf to hold elections in Pakistan on January 8. He has been non-committal thus far.

Recommendations of CRSS:

Given the volatility of the Pakistani situation, CRSS strongly recommends the following:

1. To establish an impartial, high-powered judicial investigation commission the executive authority of which should lie beyond the Government of Pakistan; preferably with the United Nations.
2. Let the Commission determine procedures for carrying out its investigation, taking into account Pakistani law and judicial procedures.
3. Let the Secretary-General of the United Nations notify a period within which the Commission shall complete its investigation.
4. The findings of the investigations must be made public for the people of Pakistan to know the vital details in the assassination of their former PM.
5. The government must consult the political opposition on the issue of holding or postponing the elections. The ECP must take all political parties onboard with regards to any such decision.
6. The Pakistani government must hold free and fair elections on January 8, 2008. The preparations of the ECP were complete to hold elections all across Pakistan, such level of preparations should not go in vain and the elections should be held. The ECP must manage to hold elections in the troubled districts too and it should cooperate closely with the security agencies.