

## The Record

The Bhutto assassination and U.S. foreign policy

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THE ASSASSINATION of former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto highlights not only the difficulties in building democracy in the Middle East, but the problematic nature of U.S. foreign policy in Pakistan.

While stressing democracy promotion, the Bush administration has continued the policy of previous administrations in supporting authoritarian regimes, such as that of Pakistani strongman, Pervez Musharraf. Having given Pakistan and other authoritarian regimes in the Middle East billions of dollars in aid, does this policy really serve Pakistani and U.S. interests in the region?

Current U.S. policy towards Pakistan, where stability trumps democracy, is not only self-defeating but based on faulty premises. One of Benazir Bhutto's most important campaign themes was that democracy is the best antidote for terrorism.

Apart from mild criticism, the Bush administration did little to support democracy in Pakistan this past fall when Musharraf, who seized power in a 1999 coup, arrested members of the Pakistani judiciary who refused to confirm the results of the controversial October 2007 presidential elections.

If the United States were serious about promoting democracy in Pakistan, it would have withdrawn support for Musharraf following his blatant suppression of the Pakistani judiciary, including the house arrest of the Supreme Court's chief justice and handpicking a new court to rubber stamp his bid to retain his hold on the presidency.

The arrest of judges, accompanied by the beating and arrest of pro-democracy activists who protested Musharraf's extra-constitutional actions, has fueled Islamist radicals' claims that democracy in Pakistan is a sham. Likewise, it has undermined the strength of those forces, especially the educated middle classes, who are democracy's strongest supporters.

Nevertheless, the Bush administration continues to argue that Musharraf's regime is critical to the war on terror.

Because Pakistan possesses nuclear weapons and its northwest provinces are probably home to Osama Bin Laden, in the eyes of the Bush administration the Musharraf government has carte blanche to follow whatever policies it chooses.

The Bush administration conveniently forgets that the very forces upon which it places its hopes for stability in Pakistan include elements of the Pakistani military and secret service organization, the Inter-Services Intelligence, which helped create the Taliban in the 1990s.

One reason Pakistan supported the Taliban was the belief that it would bring stability to a war-ravaged Afghanistan, which had experienced continuous turmoil since the Soviet invasion of 1979.

Another reason for its support was to offset demands by Pakistan's large Pashtun population for regional autonomy in Western Pakistan, or even an independent state.

Both Pakistan and the United States supported the Taliban during the 1990s in the effort to build a pipeline that would transport natural gas from Central Asia through Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Arabian Sea, thereby bypassing a hostile Iran. Domestic and international pressure, in response to the Taliban's flagrant human rights abuses, especially against women, forced the Clinton administration to withdraw support for the Taliban in the late 1990s.

However, because the Pakistani military and ISI retained their ties, it is unrealistic to expect that the Pakistani army will decisively suppress the Taliban anytime soon.

What are the United States' options in Pakistan? Support for authoritarian rule has not worked. Pakistan is the most unstable it has been since Western Pakistan seceded to form Bangladesh in 1971. Wide-spread poverty and unemployment, combined with the great wealth of a small number of powerful families, government corruption, and lack of democratic freedoms, not Osama Bin Laden and the Taliban, are the real causes of radical politics in Pakistan.

These problems have yet to be addressed by any Pakistani government to date.

U.S. aid to Pakistan needs to be directed away from the military to civil society and democracy building, especially to organizations that promote freedom of expression, tolerant interpretations of Islam, human rights and social justice.

While the Pakistani military would not welcome this policy shift, it is highly dependent on the United States and would have little choice but to end its repression of pro-democracy forces.

Making the continuation of U.S. aid contingent upon meaningful political reforms as well as addressing the problems of poverty and unemployment would constitute a powerful testament to Benazir Bhutto's legacy of trying to create a more democratic, secular and tolerant Pakistan.

U.S. support of the only forces that can ultimately bring stability to Pakistan, namely those committed to democracy, constitutes the most effective means of fighting the war on terror.

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