

What Bhutto Attack Means For Pakistan

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By Ahmed Rashid

The bloody carnage in Karachi has once again plunged Pakistan into a political crisis, raised serious doubts as to whether parliamentary elections can be held in January and deepened the longstanding mistrust between President Pervez Musharraf and opposition leader Benazir Bhutto. Within hours of the bomb attack there were a string of accusations and innuendos by members of Ms Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) leaders that the government security and intelligence services failed to prevent the blasts. The real script is to save the beleaguered Gen Pervez Musharraf, and involves another former prime minister in exile - the fragrant Daughter of the East, Benazir Bhutto. When in a few weeks' time she repeats yesterday's homecoming saga from London, she will be welcomed by the very police that manhandled Mr Sharif and she will be allowed to lead a procession to her home town.

In response Gen Musharraf condemned the bombing as an attack on democracy. However, Ms Bhutto had plenty of known enemies which included the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, al-Qa'eda and the coalition provincial government that rules her home province of Sind.

The Pakistani Taliban had directly called for suicide bombers to attack Ms Bhutto on her return.

She has also accused pro-jihadi retired and serving military officers in Gen Musharraf's multiple intelligence agencies of plotting against her. She had also said that the ruling Pakistan Muslim League (PML) party, which has been the handmaiden of the military regime since 1999, was against her return.

The claims and counter-claims will continue but the bombing may give Gen Musharraf and the ruling PML the excuse to postpone general elections that could bring Ms Bhutto to power.

According to the Constitution, Gen Musharraf has the powers to postpone the elections for up to 12 months.

The PML has long been urging Gen Musharraf to delay the elections so that Ms Bhutto's popular support is whittled down.

Even if elections are held in January as expected, public participation will be minimal in the wake of yesterday's bomb attack.

Political rallies and demonstrations, public meetings and door to door campaigning by candidates is likely to be heavily curtailed. Under such circumstances the elections can only be a half-hearted affair and the potential for the military to rig the elections as it did in 2002 will be significant.

Government spokesmen say Ms Bhutto acted recklessly and took unnecessary risks by insisting on leading a 20 mile-long slow-moving convoy from the airport to the centre of Karachi, especially after Gen Musharraf had asked her to postpone her return.

She had also declined a government offer to fly her in a helicopter from the airport to the spot where she was due to hold a political rally. Ms Bhutto clearly took a calculated risk that cost the lives of 140 people, but she had also put her own life on the line.

After nine years in exile Ms Bhutto felt the need to make her political mark and show the army, the public and the international community that she still has a massive following.

Moreover, she wanted to make her return very different from the abortive return of another former prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, who was put on a plane and sent off to Saudi Arabia when he landed in Lahore in September. Police prevented his supporters from rallying at the airport to receive him.

For the US and Britain, which have led efforts to forge a power-sharing deal between Gen Musharraf and Ms Bhutto and to hold free and fair elections, the bombing comes as a severe blow.

Unlike Gen Musharraf and the army who have prevaricated on the need to crack down hard on extremism, Ms Bhutto has been clear about the issue from the start.

Her party faithful have backed her on the need to politically isolate the Islamic fundamentalist parties, deal harshly with Islamic extremism, make up with President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan and settle another insurgency that is taking place in Balochistan by the Baloch tribes who are seeking separation from Pakistan

Gen Musharraf has refused to seek a national reconciliation between the army, the PML and the myriad opposition parties.

Instead he has successfully divided the opposition, played hard and soft with the extremists and still wants to keep Islamic fundamentalist parties on board with him in any future electoral alliance.

It was hoped that Ms Bhutto's safe arrival, her show of strength and her subsequent dialogue with the military would increase pressure on Gen Musharraf to do the right thing.

Now that looks increasingly unlikely, as Ms Bhutto is forced to cordon herself off under tight security, reduce contact with her supporters and refrain from touring the country as she had planned to do.

The Karachi bombing will also have the indirect result of preventing right-wing politicians from deserting the ruling PML and joining her party as some had planned to do.

Whoever the bombers are, they have sent a clear signal that they will continue to target Ms Bhutto and anyone who is associated with her.