

## Canada's Hub for International Affairs

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By Ahmed Rashid.

*Ahmed Rashid has been covering politics in Pakistan and the surrounding region for decades. He spoke to us from Lahore, where violent attacks are occurring with increasing frequency in the run up to the May 11 general election.*

**This past Friday, the special public prosecutor on former Prime Minister Benzanir Bhutto's case was gunned down in broad daylight in Lahore. Does this kind of targeted attack indicate that Pakistan has returned to the brink?**

The fact that a very senior government official was gunned down in broad daylight in the city is another demonstration that extremists have penetrated all the major cities. But I don't think the death of Chaudhry Zulfikar Ali, the chief prosecutor, was part of the real crisis facing Pakistan, which is the terrorist violence that's being directed at three liberal, semi-secular parties. I think it was connected to the cases that he was handling: the Bhutto case, and the 2008 Mumbai massacre in 2008, which killed 156 people.

**Which parties have been targeted in the lead up to the elections?**

The former ruling party, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) headed by Bhutto's son, the Awami National Party (ANP), and the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM). The Taliban have vowed to eliminate these parties and their representatives. Their aim is to prevent them from taking part in the elections. In April, more than 100 people were killed and over 300 were wounded - candidates, supporters, family members, and ordinary citizens who belonged to these parties.

**Do you think that those killings are going to have a serious impact on the number of PPP, ANP, and AQM candidates that run on May 11?**

I think they will have a very dramatic effect. I fear very much that the fundamentalists, and some extremists, will be elected to the provincial parliament in the Northwest province where most of the killings have taken place. I fear that these three parties will all do poorly because people will not go to the polling stations to vote for them, and that overall, there will be a low turnout. People are aware that the leaders and candidates of these parties will be targeted on election day, which is a deterrent to supporting them.

**And will that awareness be an equal deterrent in every part of the country?**

There's a very strange phenomenon happening here. Pakistan has four provinces. The largest province, Punjab, which has the largest percentage of the population, has not been affected by the violence at all. Some kind of agreement seems to have been made with the fundamentalist extremists - the conspiracy theories centre on the former Punjab chief minister, who is now the leading opposition figure, and the Sharif brothers. They are suspected of cutting a deal to keep their territories free of violence. All the while, the three smaller provinces are being targeted. So, they're feeling very resentful - they're angry that they're getting far more than their share of the violence.

**So the deeper implications of the election for national stability may not really be felt until it's over...**

Exactly. If Sharif wins the elections, the pre-election violence is going to be a very destabilizing factor - the fact that so many people have died in the three smaller provinces, but hardly anyone in Punjab, will be hugely divisive.

**Aside from the deepening of internal divisions, do you have other major concerns for the nation and the region following the election?**

Firstly, there is no consensus among the political parties or within the security establishment on counterterrorism policy. The terrorism that has worsened over the past few months won't simply go away on election day, the next government will be targeted as well. But no one has come forward with a comprehensive plan. Secondly, there is no consensus on economic policy. The economy is really collapsing; domestic and international uncertainty as to the status of Pakistan's loans and debt is mounting. Thirdly, no concrete position has been adopted by any of the political parties on how to bring peace to Afghanistan, and sustain it. That issue is being left up to the army, which I don't think is going to work. The army has been supportive of the Taliban for the last twelve years; civilian input into Pakistan's policy toward Afghanistan is needed. None of the parties, however, seem ready to provide this.

**The U.S. has been keeping its distance from Pakistan's domestic political scene. Is this a smart strategy if the stability of Pakistan and, by extension Afghanistan, is at stake?**

I think it is a smart strategy. The level of anti-American and anti-Western rhetoric in Pakistan is already very high. Many political figures are trying to rally support from right-wingers and Islamic fundamentalists. When the U.S. envoys and U.S. delegations come here and lecture the Pakistanis on what they should and should not have done, I think that worsens an already bad situation.

**In light of the instability of the current political situation, what are the chances that the Bhutto case will be brought to a just conclusion?**

So many extremely important cases and investigations have been shelved. The assassination of Benazir Bhutto has not been investigated by her own party - the PPP - and they have been in power for the last five years. They've been too frightened, I think, to investigate it properly. The killing of Osama bin Laden, and what he was doing in Pakistan, has not been properly investigated by the authorities. A report was compiled, but it is classified, so nobody knows what it contains. And so on. It seems unlikely that the Benazir Bhutto will be resolved.

**What about the ongoing investigations of former President Musharraf? Might these indicate a push for greater accountability by the judicial system that could extend to election-related crimes?**

I think Musharraf's case will follow a similar path to other high profile political cases. There is much anger being expressed by retired military officers at the way Musharraf, a former army chief and president, is being treated. I don't see Musharraf going to court or having to answer questions. It's more than likely that either the current government or the next one will forgive or pardon him, and send him back into exile.