

# Pakistan's It Girl

Can Benazir Bhutto hold her country together?

By Eric S. Margolis

IT TOOK ONE suicide bombing in Karachi to undermine the short-lived political marriage of convenience that Washington engineered between Pakistan's embattled president, Pervez Musharraf, and former prime minister, Benazir Bhutto.

The Musharraf government immediately blamed the usual Islamic suspects for the deadly explosions that greeted Bhutto's long awaited return to Pakistan from self-imposed exile. At least 139 people died, and hundreds were injured in the Oct. 18 attack on her cortege. Two days later, however, Bhutto told me her security advisers were convinced high-ranking security officials of the Musharraf regime were behind the attack. So much for the honeymoon in Pakistan.

The military-dominated government of President-General Musharraf, as he styles himself, has run onto the rocks. The general, who came to power after overthrowing then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in a 1999 coup, is deeply unpopular in all sectors of Pakistani society, save the tiny, pro-Western wealthy elite. He has held on to power for the past eight years by rigging elections, packing the national and state assemblies with yes-men, using courts to punish critics, muzzling Pakistan's once feisty media, and silencing opponents by bribery or arrest.

So far, Pakistan's highly disciplined armed forces have remained loyal to Musharraf. The military establishment is the only national institution that still commands public respect and has not been engulfed by corruption. But there is growing unrest as Musharraf increas-

ingly accedes to U.S. pressure to use Pakistan's soldiers to battle pro-Taliban Pashtun tribesmen in Northwest Frontier Province and Baluchistan. Both important provinces are now in a state of rebellion against Islamabad. Musharraf is being accused by growing numbers of Pakistanis of being a "puppet of Washington" and waging war against his own people at America's command.

Alarmed that the most important ally in President Bush's war on terror was foundering, the administration sought to shore up his rule through a backroom deal with Bhutto, Pakistan's most popular politician. A series of outstanding criminal corruption charges against her were dropped, and she was permitted to return home supposedly free from prosecution in exchange for her agreement to some sort of power-sharing pact with the military junta. But Pakistan's increasingly independent-minded Supreme Court vowed to review this unseemly arrangement.

I asked Benazir Bhutto during an afternoon we recently spent together in London how could she make such a tawdry deal with the man she had so long denounced as a usurper, dictator, and enemy of his own people? Bhutto's answer: she will reinstate democracy and it will eventually replace military rule and defeat spreading Islamic extremism.

Not good enough, I challenged her. Such a deal would sully her reputation, damage her cause, and expose her to charges of crass political opportunism. She shrugged off my concerns with her mantra: "democracy is the answer to Pakistan's problems."

But what kind of democracy? That of Thomas Jefferson or George W. Bush? When Bhutto was prime minister, she complained that the military was excluding her from all national security issues and foreign policy. She used to scold me—an admirer of Pakistan's military—"There you go again, Eric, you and your beloved Pak generals..." The generals, in turn, and the religious leaders, too, despised Bhutto, and dismissed her as "that girl." She ended up controlling only about a quarter of the government.

If Bhutto becomes prime minister for a third time, to paraphrase Stalin's famous quip about the Vatican, how many divisions will she have? Even if Musharraf relinquishes his position as commander of the armed forces, as he promised, his hand-picked military allies—all vetted and pre-approved by the Pentagon and CIA, according to my Washington sources—will control the military's command structure. Last March, senior Indian intelligence sources told me that Washington had already selected Pakistan's next chief of staff of the armed forces—and possible future leader—Gen. Ashfaq Kayani. They were right.

With Musharraf and his generals retaining complete control of military, intelligence, foreign affairs, financial, security, and cash-flow from Washington, what will be left for reincarnated Prime Minister Bhutto? Education, public sanitation, receiving visiting bigwigs? This is the kind of ersatz democracy the Bush administration supports in Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Palestine, Jordan, and Turkey, where a junta of reactionary generals runs a state within the state.

Benazir thinks she will succeed in leveraging Musharraf and his henchmen from power by using her huge public appeal. But she failed twice before to do this. What will make her third time lucky, particularly since Musharraf plainly intends to use her for democratic window dressing to appease critics in the U.S. Congress and at home? "I won't be used," Bhutto insists, but I'm not so sure. She is a courageous, resourceful lady, but Musharraf and his allies hold almost all the levers of power—except, of course, public support.

Bhutto must also contend with widely believed accusations of past corruption, though she insists they were all politically motivated. Furthermore, she is dogged by charges she is "Washington's woman," a tool of U.S. policy in Pakistan. Critics also accuse her of being too Westernized and anti-Islamic. Her frequent diatribes against Pakistan's Islamists, tribesmen, and the Taliban, aimed at currying favor in Washington, have reinforced the view she is a carpet-bagger. By contrast, the leader of India's Congress Party, Italian-born Sonia Gandhi, has successfully become more Indian than the Indians.

While Musharraf and Bhutto glare at one another like two scorpions in a bottle, Pakistan continues to slide toward the abyss. The war in Afghanistan now pits Western forces against much of the Pashtun tribal people who straddle the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. It is bleeding into Pakistan, enlarging the conflict for already strained U.S. and NATO forces and raising the risk of American combat operations in Pakistan, a nation of 165 million whose tough armed forces number 550,000. Musharraf's use of Pakistan's army against insurgents in the federal tribal areas—a blatant violation of Pakistan's constitution—is causing national outrage. "Musharraf, fight India for Kashmir, not your own people," screamed the Urdu press—until gagged.

Musharraf has escaped numerous assassination attempts. His foes, whose number is legion, will continue gunning for him. An attempted military coup was already crushed earlier this year, thanks to warnings from the CIA and NSA. More are certain to follow.

Pakistan used to be one of the world's most pro-American nations. No longer. A shocking World Public Opinion poll found 73 percent of Pakistanis believe the Bush administration is set on "weakening and dividing Islam." Even higher results came from Egypt, Indonesia, and Morocco. Most Pakistanis call Osama bin Laden a hero.

Musharraf now resembles the late Shah of Iran and Egypt's Anwar Sadat: key American allies lauded in the West but reviled at home as traitors. The Bush administration has until now put all its strategic eggs in Musharraf's basket, but a bomb or coup could end the general's rule and plunge Pakistan into chaos. General Kiyani and other senior officers would, of course, take over, but what if a power struggle ensued or the army and powerful intelligence service, ISI, split between pro-U.S. senior officers and younger nationalist ones? Who would then control Pakistan's nuclear arsenal? Washington clearly sees Benazir Bhutto as an insurance policy.

Pakistan, created in 1947, is a brittle nation, rent by sharp regional, ethnic and religious differences. A secessionist movement calling for union of the Pashtun tribes of Afghanistan and Pakistan into a new state, Pashtunistan, or independence movements in Baluchistan or Sind, would tear apart the nation and invite intervention by nuclear-armed India, just as it invaded rebellious East Pakistan in 1970.

Musharraf and Bhutto are riding a tiger. Pakistan is facing potential civil war, growing urban violence, and more assassination attempts against key leaders. This is the house of cards upon

which the Bush administration built its South Asian policy. If Pakistan implodes, the communications and supplies of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan will be severely endangered, and Pakistan could emerge as a new Iran, seething with hatred for the West. What is today a hotbed of Islamic extremists could become an arsenal for international *jihād*.

While the Bush administration, and even Laura Bush, were loudly blasting Burma's nasty military junta as repressive and anti-democratic, the U.S. was quietly providing Pakistan's military junta—which has killed over 3,000 citizens, jailed thousands without due process, torturing many, and rigged elections—with a reported \$1 billion in monthly aid, not including secret CIA stipends to key politicians and generals.

Into this maelstrom steps Benazir Bhutto. Whether she will be Pakistan's desperately needed Joan of Arc or "that girl" sent by Washington remains to be seen. Musharraf will try to isolate and marginalize her. The roles of former PM Nawaz Sharif, and the Supreme Cour, remain wild cards.

The best chance for stabilizing Pakistan and averting a major crisis there is to hold honest, democratic elections in which Bhutto, Nawaz Sharif, and Musharraf vie for office. Instead, Washington continues to abet military rule heedless of the fact that the primary cause, and main target, of the violent Islamic extremism we call "terrorism" is not the West but the Muslim world's U.S.-backed dictatorial regimes.

Only one thing is sure: the next administration in Washington is going to inherit not only the debacle in Iraq but an exceptionally confusing, unpredictable, and dangerous crisis in Pakistan. ■

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# Past the Peak

The signs were there, but Americans drove right by.

By James Howard Kunstler

IN SO FAR as it epitomizes everything that is grotesquely out of whack with American living arrangements, Houston was the perfect place for the big “peak oil” conference of the year. The 500 or so attending—geologists, oil industry execs, economists, academics, alt. fuel freaks, and freelance journalists like myself—were marooned for four days in a convention center Hilton, in a district devoid of the least urban amenity, amid a wasteland of surface parking. You couldn’t buy a stick of gum within a mile of the hotel and venturing out on foot in the 90-degree heat would have been like re-enacting the Bataan Death March. The pharaonic grandiosity of the convention center next door—the size of three aircraft carriers and resembling one architecturally—was a baleful reminder of the floundering leviathan that government has become in the face of a crisis like peak oil.

As it happened, representatives of government and the mainstream media were conspicuously absent from this conference devoted to the crucial resource needed to run places like Houston—and, incidentally, industrial civilization. Clearly, the nation is having a hard time paying attention to its energy predicament.

My own theory as to why this is so goes something like this: having poured our collective wealth into an infrastructure for daily life based on incessant motoring—suburbia and all its accessories—we have become hostages to a pernicious psychology of previous

investment. We cannot face the awful fact that our way of life really has no future in the coming age of energy scarcities. Thus there is little coherent public conversation about it. This leaves those working on peak-oil issues consigned unfairly to the intellectual margins—with Sasquatch hunters and UFO abductees—while the nation ignores a wide range of ominous signals and parties on.

For those who have been distracted by the mainstream news diet headlining Britney Spears and the toilet communication techniques of Sen. Larry Craig, a *précis* on peak oil may be in order. Peak oil is shorthand for the geologic fact that oil is a finite resource and that credible signs indicate we have passed the world’s all-time oil production high point, with rather dire implications for how we live. Viewed through an admittedly short-range rearview mirror, the numbers suggest that July 2006 was the peak, at just over 86 million barrels a day (m/b/d). Since then, world production has fallen to the 84 m/b/d range. Meanwhile, world demand has risen to about 86 m/b/d and is widely predicted to reach 88 m/b/d next year. In short, the demand line has now crossed the production line, and the trend is almost certain to continue—with potential for oscillation as economies wobble in response to high oil prices and regional scarcities.

Crucial to understanding the peak-oil problem is that it is not strictly about the world running out of oil. It is about what happens as the world slides down the

slippery slope of depletion. There will always be oil. But quite a bit of it will never be extracted for one reason or another—unfavorable geography, deep water, armed conflict. The quality of the world’s oil supply is already trending firmly away from once abundant light-and-sweet crudes to the leftover heavy-and-sour crudes, which are harder to refine and yield less gasoline. All these pieces of the plot are subject additionally to “above-the-ground” geopolitical factors that will determine who gets how much of whatever is left.

I hasten to add that peak-oil theory—indeed oil geology itself—contradicts the popular wishful idea that the earth contains a creamy nougat center of oil that is continuously replenishing old fields. This is just not consistent with reality, and the broad circulation of the fantasy is a symptom of our desperation and cluelessness. In fact, much of the world’s production has relied on a handful of “super-giant” fields, such as Ghawar in Saudi Arabia and Cantarell in Mexico, which account for about 60 percent of their countries’ total production. There is absolutely no evidence that the super-giants—which also include China’s Daqing and Kuwait’s Burgan—are being replenished. They are playing out largely because the latest and greatest technology for oil recovery has had the paradoxical effect of draining the existing fields more efficiently. The same is true of the North Sea and Alaska’s Prudhoe Bay. It is also important to know that worldwide discovery of oil