

Benazir Bhutto

The Murder of Benazir Bhutto

What Pakistan Lost

by Charles Strohmer

Two months before she returned to her homeland and was murdered in public (Dec. 27, 2007), I had the opportunity to hear Benazir Bhutto address a group at the Council on Foreign Relations. Twice a former Prime Minister of Pakistan, she struck me not so much as a politician but as a leader whose clear, bold vision for a democratic Pakistan could not be misunderstood. Nor could her keen grasp of both the military dictatorship and the religious extremists who stood in the way of that vision. Her return to Pakistan was supported by her husband and family, even though it seemed clear from what she said that they assumed she could be murdered, if not by one enemy then by any of several others. I did not meet Mrs. Bhutto, but having heard her speak I now feel a sense of loss from her death. You should, too. Here's why. "This suppression of democracy in my homeland has had profound institutional consequences," Bhutto said.

She was safe enough living outside Pakistan. So why return? She was returning, she said at CFR, because Pakistan had changed dramatically (but not for the better) since the last time she left office (1996). "Military dictatorship has fueled the forces of extremism," she said, "and has put into place a government that is unaccountable, unrepresentative, undemocratic, and disconnected from the ordinary people of the country and their aspirations. Military dictatorship is born from the power of the gun, and so it undermines the concept of the rule of law and gives birth to a culture of might, a culture of weapons, violence, and intolerance." All things considered, Mrs Bhutto, with family support, had made the decision to return to her homeland, knowing the risk.

Twice Pakistan's Prime Minister (1988-1990; 1993-1996), she now wanted to give it another go, to stand again for election and to seek to democratize the institutional structures. And much of the country was behind her. She wanted to change the nation. "This suppression of democracy in my homeland has had profound institutional consequences," Bhutto said. "I plan to return later this year to Pakistan to lead a democratic movement for the restoration of democracy. I seek to lead a democratic Pakistan which is free from the yoke of military dictatorship, and that will cease to be a haven, the very petri dish, of international terrorism." She spoke passionately of her belief that "people empowered by democracy, human rights, and economic opportunity will turn their backs decisively against extremism." But she did not see quick fixes as the solution. She knew that if she were elected a third time, it would mean walking cooperatively with others down the long and hard slog of institutional changes.

Mrs. Bhutto did not strike me as a dreamy idealist when outlining her proposals for economic, social, and political change, for she had in her sights the radicalized opposition that fostered high levels of social and religious intolerance and suicide bombings. And she rued the blind eye of a military that at times would look the other way while Taliban and al Qaeda regrouped and reorganized in the western provinces. submit-or-die ideologues do not negotiate with others

I often hear, she said at CFR, that you've got to placate the hardliners, bring them in to the mainstream. So we've given them two provinces, and even some opposition political power; but, she asked, "has it quenched their thirst? No! They want more and more. They want to take over the whole state of Pakistan, not on the basis of having the popular support, but on the basis of having the support of the militants and the militias.... We have to save Pakistan from within, and by saving Pakistan from within I think it will be having a profound affect on our region, on Afghanistan, on India, and on the larger world community."

I sensed an urgency in her voice and a dead-honesty that is hard to find amid the political hedging we often get from our own leaders. To a question from Richard Haass about the difficulties of ending the extremist threat from western Pakistan, she replied candidly: "You've got to take them on. If you don't take them on, then they win the battle anyway. Whereas if you take them on, well, either you win, and if you don't win, well, you've tried, and somebody else is going to come in and try harder." Mrs. Bhutto understood that the submit-or-die ideologues do not negotiate with others.

Beyond that, however, I sensed in her a wisdom that believed in the potential for cooperative and peaceable agreements that are made possible among those who are different but who will nevertheless not let the common humanity that underscores us all be held

hostage to absolutized ideological interests. You sit down, you talk things through, you know you have ultimate religious beliefs that cannot be reconciled; yet you also know that that need not preclude working together to reach agreements based on mutual good for the betterment of your community or society or nation. Or the world, for that matter. Do you now feel the sense of loss that I do?

Charles Strohmer is a visiting research fellow of the [Center for Public Justice](#) and the founding director of [The Wisdom Project](#). He is [writing a book on](#) Christian-Muslim and U.S.-Middle East relations. For a transcript of Bhutto's talk at CFR: [click here](#).

Copyright. Permission to reprint required.

Discuss the article here