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[The assassination of Benazir Bhutto:](#)

## The paradoxes of Pakistan

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[This is one in a series of posts responding to the [assassination of Benazir Bhutto](#). For more on the situation in Pakistan, see the recently launched SSRC essay forum, [Pakistan in Crisis](#).---ed.]

Yet another dramatic political assassination in South Asia! Sharing the fates of Mahatma Gandhi (1948), Liaquat Ali Khan (1951), Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1975), Ziaur Rahman (1981), Indira Gandhi (1984), Rajiv Gandhi (1991), Murtaza Bhutto (1996), and Ahmad Shah Massoud (2001), Benazir Bhutto has become the latest political leader in this troubled region to be brought down by vengeful opponents. Once we add to the above list the other leaders who were executed (e.g., Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Mohammad Najibullah), died under suspicious circumstances (e.g., Zia-ul Haq, Nur Muhammad Taraki), or forced into exile by military coups (e.g., Iskander Mirza), the violent history of contestation for power in the region becomes brutally apparent.

While pundits are busy debating who was responsible for Benazir's tragic death, the larger tragedy of Pakistan's political history should not be overlooked. A country whose name literally means "the Land of the Pure" and which was intended to become a free and flourishing promised land for Muslims in the subcontinent has become sullied with chronic poverty, political violence, ethnic strife, and religious extremism. Some sixty years ago the Founding Father of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, described the ethos of Pakistan with the following words: "You are free to go to your temples ... to your mosques or any other places of worship in the State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed – that has nothing to do with the business of the State.... We are all citizens and equal citizens of one State.... In course of time, Hindus would cease to be Hindus, and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the perceived faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the State."

If Jinnah's words now ring hollow, it is because the country he helped to establish has been encumbered with a variegated series of paradoxes from its inception. The highly Westernized founding fathers of Pakistan envisioned a secular "Muslim state" while the ulema (clergy) desired a state with Islam as its *raison d'être*. This

and a host of other disagreements insured that Pakistan was without a ratified constitution for the first nine years of its existence! Since then, even Islam itself has failed to unify the country. The country with the second largest Muslim population in the world (165 million), Pakistan has become a breeding ground for a messianic movement (Ahmadiyya), a hospice for mystical Islam (Ismailis), and a safe house for international Jihadists (al Qaeda). Islam in Pakistan has become even more heterogeneous as it has mingled with the politics of ethnicity and sub-nationalism (see, for example, Muhajir Quami Mahaz [MQM] and Lashkar-e Tayyibah). Further complicating its unity, although Pakistan is one of those rare Muslim countries in which both Shiites (e.g., Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Benazir Bhutto, Yahya Khan) and Sunnis (e.g., Zia-ul-Haq, Pervez Musharraf) have served as heads of state, vigilante attacks on Shiite communities (in addition to Christian and Hindu) are common.

Although Pakistan has built nuclear weapons, one fourth of its population lives below the poverty line and less than half are literate. It counts among its luminaries the 1979 Noble laureate physicist Abdus Salam (the first Muslim Nobel Laureate in science) and the eminent Islamic modernist thinker Fazlur Rahman, yet the former was not allowed to enter Pakistani universities after the government declared the Ahmadiyyah sect of which he was a devote follower “non-Muslim.” Similarly, Fazlur Rahman, who had been appointed by President Ayub Khan as the Director of the Central Institute for Islamic Research, had to seek academic refuge at the University of Chicago after coming under pressure from Islamic extremists.

In the political sphere, the country’s paradoxes are overwhelming. Pakistan produced the world’s first Muslim female head of state and has perhaps the most effectual women’s movement of any Muslim country. Seventeen percent of seats in the National Assembly are reserved for women. Still, the Hudood Laws instituted by President Zia-ul Haq as part of an Islamization campaign severely curtail women’s rights. Pakistan has active political parties, human rights groups, and an oppositional press, and yet its political system has been repeatedly wracked by military coups where generals suspend the constitution (e.g., 1958, 1977, 1999, 2007) and impose martial law for extended periods of time (e.g., 1977-88; 1999-2007). Even when generals do not declare themselves President or Prime Minister or choose a “civilian man” to be the public face of their regime (e.g., Zulfikar Ali Bhutto as Field Marshal Ayub Khan’s Foreign Minister, or Shaukat Aziz as General Pervez Musharraf’s Prime Minister), they engage in the practice of “Praetorianism.” In this form of political system a powerful military establishment – which in this case also happens to be one of the largest in the world – exerts constant pressure on weak civilian authorities to shape political decisions to their liking, while it claims to be technically staying out of government.

Finally, let us remember that Ms. Bhutto also embodied the paradoxes of her country. Her father was an erudite politician with a wide base of popular support and yet he managed to fritter away Pakistan’s opportunity to become a parliamentary democracy. Benazir was a highly intelligent and cosmopolitan lady but entered into an arranged marriage with the son of an important feudal family. Father and daughter both knew the art of

making compromises to stay in power. Indeed, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto did not exhibit respect for the rule of law or tolerance for dissent when he ignored human rights abuses by his army fighting the insurgency in Balochistan, when he succumbed to pressure and declared the Ahmadiyya community heretical, or when he failed to reach an agreement with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman which led to the separation of East Pakistan (Bangladesh) in 1971. Similarly, Benazir's calls for the rule of law, democracy and meritocracy would have been taken more seriously if she was bereft of the accusations of corruption that followed her family, if her army had not played such an instrumental role in helping the Taliban to take over Kabul in 1996, and if she had not insisted that the leadership of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) remain in the House of Bhutto.

It is too early to determine whether Benazir's assassination will paralyze political life in Pakistan in the same way that Rafik Hariri's assassination has in Lebanon, or whether it will have the tragic but fleeting effect of Indira Gandhi's assassination in India. Instead of signing a requiem for Pakistan, we should hope that a great number of its citizens will raise their voice in unison against the malaise of extremism and political violence in the same manner that Pakistan's judges and lawyers stood up to officialdom.

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