

Guest Commentary: Benazir Bhutto's Doomed Return to Pakistan

By James R. Ellis, Lt. Gen. U.S. Army (Ret.)

TWO MONTHS HAVE passed since Benazir Bhutto's assassination. After listening to the news and commentary, I decided to offer a personal perspective having spent two years in Pakistan during the period of Bhutto's first term as prime minister.

My assignment to Pakistan was in response to the August 1988 plane crash that killed President Zia ul-Haq, more than a dozen of his government officials, U.S. Ambassador Arnie Raphel, and the senior U.S. military officer in the country, Army Brigadier General Herb Wassom. After the crash, my wife and I were rushed to Islamabad where I replaced General Wassom. At that time, there were several key issues at stake: heightened tensions between Pakistan and India (over Kashmir and other concerns); operation of a multibillion dollar Military Assistance Program; the investigation into the cause of the plane crash; and support for the Afghan "freedom fighters" (mujahidin) opposing both the invading Soviet Army and the puppet communist government in Kabul (although this was not within my charter, I did get to know many of the U.S., Pakistani and Afghan leaders of that effort). One immediate goal was encouraging the Pakistani military to support the return to civilian government, and it was the subsequent election that fall which brought Bhutto to power.

Pakistan has a most unique culture formed by more than 4,000 years of South Asian (Hindu) history, 1,300 years of Islamic religion and 200 years of British rule. It is surrounded by Afghanistan, Iran, India, China and the former Soviet Union—a tough neighborhood. Internal strife is the norm, suspicion of and conflict with India is a constant, and the border area with Afghanistan is as wild as any place in the world. No one (Alexander the Great, India, Russia, or Britain) has ever been able to control the region or the tribes there, nor can the current Pakistani government. The several times I visited the area, I was always with a Pakistani Army escort.

The U.S. press and many policymakers are relatively uninformed about the culture, geography and demography of this country that is so key to the "war on terrorism" and to stability in a critical region of the world. Also, it should not be forgotten that Pakistan is an Islamic country and more than 99.5% of the population (160 million) is Muslim.

I met Bhutto a few times during her first term. She was personable and engaging, but had problems governing due to persistent accusations that she and her family were corrupt. In fact, it was charges of corruption that led to her removal from the prime minister position on two occasions. There are strong allegations that the Bhutto family stole billions from the national treasury and government contracts while she was in office. Her husband was known as "Mr. Ten Percent," meaning that if one wanted to do business with the government of Pakistan they had to pay him 10% of the contract. He spent several years in jail on corruption charges.

Bhutto had many enemies—including some members of her own family who believed that she was involved in the death of at least one of her brothers. Also, her political party, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), is only one of several vying for power. Many groups had a motive for her assassination.

Bhutto had been a darling of the U.S. press, and from her return to Pakistan until her assassination the media failed to present her in a balanced manner. If Bhutto's full history had been highlighted ahead of her return, there would have been less hope in the West that she would "restore democracy" and a greater realization that her return was fraught with danger. It has been reported that the U.S. State Department brokered her return as a way of bolstering U.S. and international support for Pakistan and its continued assistance in the war on terrorism. Now, as a result of her assassination, this move could backfire, a consequence that should have been foreseen.

Some pundits have railed against Pakistan's inability to protect a political candidate. Yet, from the time it was announced that Bhutto would return it was a foregone conclusion that

assassination attempts would be made against her. Given the way she mingled with the crowds and the fact that crowd control in the country is extremely difficult, it was only a matter of time before someone or some group was successful. Indeed, before criticizing other governments for failure to provide

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security to their political leaders, we should look at our own history to see how difficult this can be. The United States has had four presidents assassinated in its history, and there have been many assassination attempts against sitting presidents and presidential candidates. Just in the 60 years since Pakistan became a separate country (1947), the United States has seen the assassination of both President John F. Kennedy and presidential candidate Senator Bobby Kennedy. Additionally, there were more than a half-dozen other assassination attempts, including the shooting of President Ronald Reagan. This country, however, has been strong enough to survive such violence without destroying our constitution or our democratic values.

Now, the United States must look beyond Bhutto's assassination because a more serious concern is the future stability of Pakistan, and the guaranteed security of the country's several dozen nuclear weapons.

While Americans deplore the assassination and resulting violence and desire movement toward a more democratic society, it is my assessment that we cannot afford to turn away from Pakistan. We must—for our own national interests—maintain our influence there by supporting whatever government emerges from the recent elections. Of equal importance, we must continue to support the Pakistani Army if we are to have success in neighboring Afghanistan and in maintaining continued stability

in the region. Many in the West do not wish to accept the fact that Pakistan's Army is the strongest and most enduring institution in the country and is the greatest source of internal stability; during previous periods of government by elected prime ministers, it was the Army's decision whether or not to back the government that determined its lifespan and success.

LTG(R) James R. Ellis graduated from West Point in 1962 and later received a master's degree in International Relations from Princeton University. He commanded two Infantry Companies in combat—the first with the 82nd Airborne Division in the Dominican Republic during the country's 1965 Revolution, and the second with the 1st Infantry Division in Vietnam. He also served a year in Vietnam as an Advisor. His General Officer assignments included two years as U.S. Defense Representative to Pakistan, Commanding General of the 10th Mountain Division, Deputy Commander-in-Chief of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), and Commanding General of Third Army (Patton's Own), the Army component of CENTCOM. In these last two assignments, he made many visits to East Africa, the Middle East and South Asia and had extensive contact with political and military leaders.