



## BEYOND THE MIDDLE EAST

### Pakistan: The Rise of *Sharif* and the Cost of Islamic Rule

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The protest rally in Pakistan, dubbed “the Long March”, was orchestrated to demand reinstatement of the chief justice and 59 other senior judges who were fired by president *Musharraf* last November. The crowd of 20-40 thousand people included lawyers whose responsibility it is to defend the rights of individuals. Yet, as this crowd converged upon Islamabad, they began brutally chanting “hang him”. The target of this fury was President *Musharraf* and the person stoking the crowd’s passion was *Nawaz Sharif*.

It is striking that the press did not report the crowd’s chant as shocking but rather as an almost natural, expected reaction. Whenever politics becomes violent, however, there is no telling when the violence will stop. In anticipation of an unfolding tragedy following the assassination of *Bhenazir Bhutto*, the writer *Ma’mun Fendi* stated: “Without Bhutto and enlightened people like her, Pakistan will become a Taliban tomorrow.”<sup>1</sup> As PI Online reported at the time,<sup>2</sup> *Fendi* was concerned that the death of Bhutto could lead to a cycle of revenge killings -- *Musharraf*, because he had turned against the Taliban he initially supported, and *Sharif* because of his close relationship with the Islamists seeking to rule. *Fendi* warned that it was possible that the entire system could collapse overnight.

For most observers like *Fendi*, it was clear that, with the death of Benazir Bhutto, the West had lost the only secular leader who provided an alternative to the unpopular *Perez Musharraf*. Bhutto’s husband, *Asif Ali Zardari*, who now leads the Pakistan People party (“PPP”), has never been popular with the masses. Ironically, it appears that *Sharif*, the former president who was toppled by *Musharraf* in a 1999 military coup, is likely to turn the tables. If *Musharraf* had had his way at the time, his rival would no longer be around. *Sharif* escaped execution thanks to pressure from President Bill Clinton and the Saudis. He was exiled to Saudi Arabia in 2000 and returned to Pakistan just before Bhutto’s assassination.

*Sharif*’s recent decision to break the coalition between his party, the Pakistan Muslim League (“PML”), and the PPP over the unresolved issue of the dismissed judges is a sure sign of his political ambition and newly recognized power. It is unclear, however, if *Sharif*’s decided to join the protest rally at the last minute simply because he was carried away by the excitement of the moment, or whether it was part of an orchestrated attempt to stage a comeback in which he seized the opportunity to enhance his public presence.

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<http://www.asharaalawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&article=451920&issue=10625>

<sup>2</sup> [Chronicle of a Death Foretold – Spotlight on Fundamentalism: The Exception or the Norm](#)

What is certain, however, is that the *madrasas* funded by the Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia, fueled the present Islamist militancy upon which Sharif's return to power now depends. In less than six months after the murder of Bhutto, it is possible that the reins of power in this nuclear nation may be handed over to a conservative nationalist Islamic movement – a far cry from the democratic transformation, including the emancipation of women, envisaged by *Bhenazir Bhutto* and the United States. *Sharif's* nationalistic views and his previous support for the army and intelligence apparatus could also help him reconcile with the upper echelons of the military and persuade them to support him.

Saudi Arabia may believe that having an Islamic government in Islamabad capable of working with the Taliban and headed by their trusted partner, *Nawaz Sharif*, represents the best option for isolating the radical Islamic groups operating on the Afghan-Pakistan borders. Such an arrangement would be similar to the evolving power sharing arrangement between the Taliban and the government of neighboring Afghanistan – an unthinkable alliance a year ago, but now probable. The Saudis, wary of what they consider a knee-jerk reaction in Washington against the “war on terror”, also believe that, in the interest of national security, they should not depend solely upon Washington's goodwill for their defense. Thus, they probably believe that having a good friend at the head of an Islamic government with nuclear capabilities is a comforting hedge.

While Washington comes to terms with the possibility of a Sharif presidency, two points are worth noting:

- The death of *Benazir Bhutto* could still play a role, as predicted by *Ma'mun Fendi*, by perpetuating violence and revenge in Pakistani politics. The protesters' call for *Musharraf's* execution serves as a stark warning of a possible cycle of violence which, as Fendi noted, could also claim the life of *Sharif* and lead to chaos.
- By betting on one man, *Nawaz Sharif*, the Saudis could be making the same mistake Washington made in pinning all their hopes on one woman, *Bhenazir Bhutto*. Even with *Sharif* and the PML in power, neither will be able to contain the rise of Islamic fanaticism, which will most likely continue to sweep through Pakistan, resulting in the continuing degradation of freedom of expression, the rights of women and the democratic process. It is also uncertain that a Taliban-style government could be counted on to defend the Saudi monarchy. Rather, they could turn against them as did *Bin Laden* who trained his fighters to liberate Islam from the hands of their “infidel rulers”. The Saudis may come to find that even a liberal Muslim woman at the helm would have been preferable to a conservative Taliban- style regime in Pakistan.

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<http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/27423F13-F862-4256-950A-7C2C097A819D.htm>

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