

A Nation Unraveling

By Mona Eltahawy

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VELEN, Germany:

At a conference on radicalization in The Hague in October, a former Pakistani foreign minister told a small group of us that he had recently warned Benazir Bhutto in a phone conversation that her return to Pakistan after eight years of self-imposed exile could be greeted by someone wearing a suicide belt.

"Do you doubt my popularity?" she asked him from Dubai, where she had been living.

No, he replied, reminding her instead that Pakistan had changed since she left.

Hours after Bhutto returned home on Oct. 19, not one, but two people wearing suicide belts killed over 135 people, showing her how much her country had indeed changed. It was one of the deadliest attacks in Pakistan's history. Now, the count is over 400 people dead in recent suicide attacks.

Just before she was shot to death at a rally on Thursday by an assassin who then blew himself up, Bhutto acknowledged that Pakistan had changed. She told supporters in Rawalpindi, "I put my life in danger and came here because I feel this country is in danger. People are worried. We will bring the country out of this crisis."

Never the most stable of countries, Pakistan is unraveling. It is difficult to find a combination of more spectacular disasters than those waiting to happen there:

Osama bin Laden is apparently still hiding in caves straddling the Pakistani-Afghan border. Taliban and Al Qaeda militants move freely across that border and have supporters among the Pakistani intelligence services.

Pakistan is ruled by Pervez Musharraf, a dictator who up until just a few weeks ago was also head of the army and has filled the country's jails with Supreme Court judges and accomplished lawyers because they represent a potent liberal and secular opposition. Musharraf has been much more forgiving of his radical Muslim opponents, holding them up as the requisite boogymen that he claims to be fighting in the ever-expanding War on Terror.

And if that isn't enough of a political cacophony, don't forget Pakistan has a goodly supply of nuclear weapons.

Perhaps only a fool would claim to know who sent the assassin to Rawalpindi, but it does not take a genius to appreciate the magnitude of the crisis that Bhutto acknowledged, and that her murder will surely accelerate.

For me as a Muslim writer, Pakistan holds the confluence of the ills of the Islamic world. Successive U.S. administrations have supported various Pakistani dictators - the current occupant of the White House is no exception.

Just this week The New York Times and the International Herald Tribune reported that the Bush administration and U.S. military officials believed that much of the \$5 billion proved by the U.S. in aid to Pakistan to bolster its military effort against Al Qaeda and the Taliban instead had been diverted to help finance weapons systems designed to counter India. The assassination of Bhutto, whom the U.S. State Department earlier this year had convinced to attempt a partnership with Musharraf, is bound to make the Christmas hangover in Washington that much worse.

For me as a young Muslim woman, Benazir Bhutto's political career was especially captivating. She was the first woman prime minister in the Muslim world when she was elected in 1988, at the age of 35.

Here was Prime Minister Bhutto, the woman leader of a Muslim republic, making irrelevant the hair-splitting of Islamic clerics over whether women could ever hold political power. Her election victory came the year I returned to Egypt, my country of birth, a freshly minted feminist after six difficult years in Saudi Arabia where women could not - and still cannot - even drive a car, let alone govern a country.

I quickly learned to separate her gender from her politics. Bhutto's record on women's rights in Pakistan was not what one would have expected. Perhaps it was unfair to pile so many expectations at her feet. But I thought it her responsibility, as the woman leading a country where, for example, raped women go to jail on adultery charges unless they can produce four witnesses to the assault.

That judicial travesty was provided by the Hudood Ordinances introduced in 1979 by General Zai ul-Haq, a military dictator flexing his Muslim muscles by using religion against women. (He was also the dictator who ousted - and then executed - Bhutto's father.) It is ironic that last December, the latest military dictator, Musharraf, signed into law an amendment to that controversial rape statute that makes it easier to prosecute sexual assault cases.

The corruption charges that dogged Bhutto to her death are reminders to me of how too often leaders in the Muslim world are dictators, or radical Islamists who both oppose the dictator (and are used by him to frighten his Western allies), or corrupt opposition leaders.

I am not terribly shocked at Bhutto's assassination - my capacity for shock at what can happen in Pakistan has long been numbed. It turned off altogether when a suicide bomber killed almost 50 people on Dec. 21 in a mosque in northwest Pakistan. The attack occurred as a former interior minister was offering prayers for the Muslim festival of Eid al-Adha, one of the most joyous and loving celebrations in the Muslim calendar. The fact that the horror of such an attack went

largely unnoticed in the global media - and especially in the Muslim media - is proof that Pakistan is unraveling.

Bhutto noticed and condemned that atrocity at a rally last Sunday, saying religious schools in Pakistan were turning children into killers, and accusing the government as timid and wrong-headed. "They always try to stop democratic forces but don't make any effort to check extremists, terrorists and fanatics," she said.

May she rest in peace and may Pakistan too find peace.

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Mona Eltahawy is a journalist based in New York. Distributed by Agence Global.

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