

Global Journalist: Benazir Bhutto's assassination and sympathy votes for her political party

Abstract: On Jan. 10, 2008, Stuart Loory and his guests reflect on the ramifications of the assassination of former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. She was campaigning when her life was taken and now, her 19-year-old son and her widower are named to lead Bhutto's party. Are they qualified? And how can this affect US-Pakistan relations and joint war against terrorism?

Bios

[Stuart Loory](#) was a long-time reporter and editor for the Chicago Sun-Times and CNN. He was the inaugural Lee Hills Chair in Free Press Studies at the Missouri School of Journalism. He [died in 2015](#).

Karim Madad is a Pakistani journalist who worked as the [economic editor](#) of the [Associated Press of Pakistan](#).

Declan Walsh is an Irish journalist and was [The Guardian's](#) correspondent for Afghanistan and [Pakistan](#) for 7 years. He's currently (Aug. 2024) the chief Africa correspondent for [The New York Times](#). He is also an [author](#).

Naveed Ahmad is a Pakistani investigative journalist who worked as a correspondent for [Geo Television Network](#) and Deutsche Welle. He's also a [geopolitical and security analyst](#) and a Arab News columnist.

Bob Deans is an American journalist who worked for 8 years as the [White House correspondent](#) for [Cox Newspapers](#). He is also an [author](#).

Keywords: benazir bhutto assassination, pakistan elections, rigged elections pakistan, president pervez musharraf, united states pakistan relations

Stuart Loory 00:00

Welcome to, welcome to Global Journalist. I'm Stuart Loory, of the Missouri School of Journalism. The fragility of Pakistan that brought Benazir Bhutto -- the former Prime Minister -- home from Dubai, to take part in an election campaign that appeared rigged to reinstall President Pervez Musharraf as the leader of both the army and the nation, and it was that fragility that resulted in her assassination two weeks ago as she campaigned. Pakistan is a

country of 165 million people. It's a nuclear power, a stronghold for al Qaeda and Taliban terrorists, an adversary of neighboring India, with its population of more than a billion. It's also a key ally of the United States in this country's fight against Islamic terrorism, headquartered in neighboring Afghanistan. Pakistan is a country that cannot control the population in much of the Northern area (sic), areas where the terrorists have their hideaways and headquarters. It's a country where a major area, an area where the Bhuttos got most of their support and that it could conceivably break away. It's a country where political opposition -- not allowed democratic procedures -- takes to the streets in violent protest. And finally, it's a country where religious and cultural differences often lead to bloodshed. Can anything be done to repair all this and bring order to a troubled land? How long would that take? The Bhutto-led opposition has responded to her assassination by naming Mrs. Bhutto's 14, I should say, 19-year-old son -- an incoming freshman at Oxford University in the United Kingdom -- and her husband as leaders of her opposition party, the People's Party of Pakistan. The son wants to complete his education before he takes an active role in politics. The husband spent 11 years in jail for corruption, in blackmail. They represent a family where death is the price of political activity. Benazir Bhutto's father was executed for corruption. Two of her brothers were murdered. Can democracy take hold in this kind of situation? Or is there a serious danger that Pakistan will go the route of neighboring Iran and Afghanistan, Afghanistan before the Taliban was ousted by an international coalition led by the United States? To discuss all this today, our guests are in, in Islamabad, Pakistan's capital, Karim Madad, economic editor of the Associated Press of Pakistan, Declan Walsh, Pakistan-Afghanistan, correspondent for The Guardian newspapers of the United Kingdom, and Naveed Ahmad, senior correspondent of Geo Television Network. In Washington, Bob Deans, foreign affairs correspondent for the Cox Newspapers. Let's start with Declan Walsh. As an outside observer in Islamist bond in Islam is in Islamabad, excuse me, bring us up to date on the situation now. Is the election likely to produce any serious results? And what is going to be done to, to repair the fragility, if anything can be done in Pakistan?

Declan Walsh 03:59

Well, people are certainly focused towards the election, that's five weeks later at the moment. But really today, the focus is very much on the suicide attack in Lahore, this afternoon, a suicide bomber went up to a group of policemen who were stationed outside the main courthouse in the city, exploded themselves, killing about 25 policemen, wounding about 60. And the significance of this event is not just the numbers involved, but very much the place. Lahore is the cultural capital of Pakistan. It is a city from where many (unintelligible) countries at least come from, and significantly, it's a place that has avoided this wave of suicide bombing that has hit the country over the past year. And so this is very much seen as an escalation of the destabilizing rule that presumably, presuming this attack has been carried out by jihadists, that the jihadist governments part (?) are very much taking the fight to the government in the run up to this election.

Stuart Loory 05:01

I, what is Musharraf going to do to, to try to maintain some control. Declan?

Declan Walsh 05:12

Well, al... al... already, there's already been a heightened security clampdown around the country. And the other complicating factors that we are now entering the Shia religious principle of (unintelligible) -- it lasts 40 days. It's traditionally a time when there has been sectarian violence in Pakistan at the past. So, really, all of these factors add up to a very grave security problem here in Pakistan. President Musharraf, of course, he, he, he has increased the security level. And the difference between now, however, and perhaps two-three months ago is that President Musharraf is no longer the head of the army. He has resigned as the head of the army. He is a civilian President. And so if the current situation continues to degrade, we may see a, a situation where it may be necessary to consider bringing troops on the streets, and significantly, that's not a decision that will be his to take anymore, that's going to be taken by the new Chief of Army Staff. His name is General Ashfaq Kayani, and he's very much considered as a slightly unknown quantity here. He's a soldier, soldier, and he's not someone who speaks very much in public, and, and people here are very much waiting to see what his rule in the, in the weeks and months to come as Pakistan goes through, but almost certainly is going to be quite a difficult time.

Stuart Loory 06:33

Bob Deans, how is all of this playing out in Washington? What, what does the United States government think it might be able to do to, to help tamp down this situation in Pakistan?

Bob Deans 06:49

Stuart, it's playing out in Washington with a great deal of, of wailing and weeping and gnashing of teeth. The situation in Pakistan goes right to the heart of the U.S. national security agenda. You mentioned yourself, this is an Islamic country of 165 million people, a nuclear arsenal, perhaps 60 weapons, entrenched Taliban and al Qaeda interest in their U.S. officials believe this is where Osama bin Laden -- who masterminded the 9-11 attacks -- is continuing to hold up. And two weeks ago today, of course, the horrendous assassination of Benazir Bhutto reminded everybody in this in Washington just how, how fragile the political, social and economic situation is there in Pakistan. And what this administration is engaged in is very much what the Pakistani people are looking for, which is a search for a credible leader. Of course, in Washington, it is a credible leader with a footnote, one who understands this American national security agenda and who can work with United States in a constructive way.

Stuart Loory 07:55

Yeah. Naveed Ahmad, do you see any possibility of a credible anti-Musharraf leader emerging who can do something about this situation?

Naveed Ahmad 08:12

When that's right, there is plenty of Washington cannot see and the very interest in policies of Washington and the people of Pakistan are contradictory to each other. They don't go in sync with other. And U.S probably thinks that (unintelligible) while he is the problem in Pakistan, these elections are not going to result in any kind of stability and any kind of movement in the situation. Rather, they're going to worsen the situation. Today, some NGOs international observers as well issued a press release about their scorecard of fairness of the election, and none of the indicators were in satisfactory terms. Uh, judiciary is not there. Media is working under extreme European (?) sanctions which were never there before. And of course, political workers are facing threats. Wherever position leader gathers momentum decides to hold public meetings, there are warnings that 6734, odd number of Swiss (?) bombers have entered the city. So opposition is there, the problem is that opposition was, was divided initially, while Benazir Bhutto was trying to contest the election, along with Nawaz Sharif, while Benazir was assassinated, the her party wanted to contest the election on January 8, but Musharraf follower thought that they are not going to win. So, and Benazir party would get a sympathy (unintelligible), which it will get. So now, the situation as it exists today, if all the pre-election rigging is set aside and we ignore it for a moment, there is a great possibility that Benazir Party's, People's Party and partisan Muslim League of Nawaz Sharif, both the position parties and both get some good votes. Islamic are not going to be in picture: They are fragmented, they are divided, and they don't have a united front, and they are not getting that kind of mass appeal, as they used to get in 2002 a year after 9-11.

Stuart Loory 10:18

Right. You say they're right, they're not in the picture, and they're fragmented, but still, there is a, a strong terrorist opposition that, as Declan, just told us, can create a lot of havoc. What can be done about that?

Naveed Ahmad 10:40

Well. Stuart, that's right, that there is this, there is this militant element that is there that's a very small one, but very effective. But the problem is that this is clear commentary on the policies

Pervez Musharraf since 99 or 2001 till today. What has he done about it? He only wanted to consolidate his regime, and that is why, and some people in Pakistan do believe external observers share their opinion, that intelligence agencies probably are extracting the situation of these militants being present in Pakistan because they are working towards the benefit of Musharraf. For example, today's society bomb attack in Lahore is seen as an attempt, or would become a catenistic (ph) element postponement of the election because ground parity suggests that despite all the street poll rigging, Musharraf followers are not getting that kind of appeal as they were expecting. (Unintelligible) Musharraf claim to presidency is highly objectionable. It was done without the support of the (technical issue/cut) . It was done against the Constitution, and of course, he had to send the entire judiciary and media packing to just do it in isolation. So, this terrorist element would remain there, as long as Pervez Musharraf is there, as long as we don't have any democratic solution to this problem in Pakistan, and these imported (unintelligible) such as (unintelligible) Saddam Hussein and... Pervez Musharraf are not going to serve. This curse of military rule will never solve the problem and would not result in democracy, as we saw over the past three times, and this time it has happened again, we are in a better again, in a worse shape than we were in 99 or 2001.

Stuart Loory 12:28

Declan, do you agree with that analysis, and do you think that the, the Musharraf regime can be replaced and, and some kind of stability established in Pakistan?

Declan Walsh 12:44

Well, certainly there's a lot of people here in Pakistan who believe President Musharraf, who is, by all accounts, extremely unpopular at the moment, has become a large part of the problem here, as opposed to the solution. And that really is the great difference between public opinion in Pakistan and the policy as it appears to be formed in Washington and the UK, where the policymakers seem to believe that President Musharraf still is their chance to influence events in, in Pakistan, to lead that hunt against al Qaeda fighters who are based principally in the north of the country, but very much taking the spike to the other parts, as we're seeing today. So, that, that, that seems to be really the great divergence. And I think to some degree, it partly explains why there is such an anticipate towards the U.S. in Pakistan. I think it's an activity that's growing at the moment, and it's very much one that, as I say, people feel that there is this great gulf between their political aspirations and how they are frustrated by the policy choices of Western countries, in particular the U.S.

Stuart Loory 13:53

Yeah, I want to talk about the antipathy to the U.S., but first I have to tell our listeners that you're listening to Global Journalist, I'm Stuart Loory. Our guests today are Bob Deans of the Cox Newspapers in Washington. Naveed Ahmad of Geo Television Network, Declan Walsh of the British newspaper The Guardian, and Karim Madad of the Associated Press in Pakistan. They're all in Islamabad. You may listen to this program again, ask questions or make comments by going to www.globaljournalist.org. Declan Walsh has just brought up the, the problems involving the United States in Afghanistan. Bob Deans, does the Bush administration understand that, and does it feel that there are any changes in its policies necessary in, in, in Pakistan?

Bob Deans 15:01

I, I think the Bush administration understands the antipathy, but I think the question of, of what can be done about is a separate one, given the imperative that this administration is confronting and trying to deal with al Qaeda and Taliban, and the extent to which the heart of that movement is centered in large part in that region. But the antipathy is something that is, in itself, a tremendous problem. And we have embraced Musharraf, who did, after all, in a bloodless coup, overthrow a democratically elected leader nine years ago. And two American administrations, Clinton and Bush, have embraced this man, we know that as of that six months ago, only 15% of the Pakistani people expressed good feelings about the United States in a Pew Research poll. That's an abysmal number, and I suspect it's come down lower since then. So, that level of antipathy itself is a problem for the United States, and particularly when we're investing about \$1.2 billion a year in military and humanitarian aid for Pakistan. And I think somehow the administration, the country, the Congress, needs to come to a little better grip of what it is the Pakistani people view in their interest. And I think this is a wider spread problem for the administration, because this administration that goes around talking about the promotion of democracy went to war in two countries saying that it was going to install democracies. And yet, here is a democratic nation being ruled by a person who took power away from a democratically elected leader, Nawaz Sharif, nine years ago, and here we are clinging to him to the bitter end, and that bitter end may now only be a few weeks away.

Stuart Loory 16:45

And if the bitter end is a few weeks away, is the army going to reassert itself? And what about the, the Benazir Bhutto-led party, which is now being led by her, her widower and her 19-year-old son. Can it have any impact there Declan?

Declan Walsh 17:15

Well, that's very much the problem for Benazir Bhutto's party at the moment and it really has to just try and hold itself together, because it's possibly going to become clear in the time to come as it was a party that was very much held together by the force of Benazir Bhutto's personality, and she was by time, by turn, she was democratic, but also be authoritarian in the way she ran her own party. Now there's a danger that it makes split apart, particularly through fact that it's run by her husband, Asif Ali Zardari, and he's someone who's quite a controversial figure here in Pakistan. He's someone who was surrounded by corrupt navigations when she was in power last in the 1990s. And so, this is really going to be an immense challenge for him. However, coming into these elections in the in the next five weeks, there is an expectation that Bhutto's party is going to get a significant uplift from the sympathy vote after her death, her party are saying that they expect to win many marginal seats they might otherwise there's been a risk of losing. They also say that they worry that the government of the President Musharraf may resort to vote looking in order to ensure that he doesn't lose the votes. The stakes are very high for President Musharraf, if he loses control of the Parliament of a second seat and then he runs the risk of being impeached by his own parliament, and as we've seen over the last couple of months -- particularly the imposition of the state of emergency, the firing of the Supreme Court justices, many of whom are still imprisoned within their own homes -- President Musharraf has really indicated that he is not willing to cede power, and, and seems to be prepared to go to quite extreme lengths, really, to hold on to it.

Stuart Loory 19:07

And Naveed, what about Mrs. Bhutto's 19-year-old son? Does he have any standing yet as a politician in Pakistan?

Naveed Ahmad 19:22

Well, people have sympathy with the son because history is repeating itself. Benazir father was hanged by a dictator and then, then she was sent in exile. In this case, this kid is very young -- Benazir was 26 at that time, she had completed her education. But as far as this election is concerned, definitely that is going to be a factor. And no matter what happens, is he a politician or he is not? Is this his party and his words are going to be respected in the elections, and there would be some surged. As far as his own persona is concerned, that, Mr. Bilawal is concerned, he held a press conference in London, and he sounded pretty impressive, except for one question that was asked by a journalist that this does not sound democratic, that you are succeeding your mother, and this question will definitely be asked to him again and again. And there are two dozens who are very competent and sons of Benazir's brother, they are going to compete for the same position. And this has already started to happen. People don't like Zardari, as my colleague just said -- the husband of Benazir Bhutto -- who has been corrupt, who has gone all called all kinds of allegations on him. So, this vision within People's Party's Act is the biggest nightmare Pakistan is facing. It's not with regard to anything else, but that

People's Party, which is emerging in a stronger party, might disintegrate into smaller factions at the hands of intelligence agencies, at the hands of family feud, and that is what the family might have to look at. Which is, which is a bigger challenge for Bilawal Zardari., and he said in that statement that "I love my cousins", and similarly, is appearing on the cousin side, but both, one is dominated by a father, and others are being, you know, under the instruction of their mother. So, it's likely that there is a merger, but he has a lot to face. He is bright, he is respected, he is young, and people can associate with them, their mother with him, his mother and his grandfather. But his own father, which is Zardari, would, would become a major, major dilemma for him. Can become a major hangover and liability.

Stuart Loory 21:39

Yeah. If I can just bring Declan back into this and, and ask you Declan about the assassination of Benazir itself. There is, of course, a lot of controversy developing now, and conspiracy theories over who actually carried out the assassination and why? How important is the investigation of that going to be to the political future of Pakistan?

Declan Walsh 22:14

Well, it, it certainly is a very contentious investigation. Like you say, there's a very broad range of theory about who kills Benazir and why. It's, its very hard to really put your finger on one of them and point it as being more likely than the others. But the important point here really is a perception. And there's a very widespread perception that somehow or the other people within the state may have been involved in and particularly important for President Musharraf to try and scotch those, those, those suspicions, those public suspicions, in a credible way. And he's hoping to achieve that through both the investigation and also through the involvement of police detectives from Britain, Scotland Yard, and they've come here over the last number of days, they are significantly going to be trying to help to establish the cause of brutal death, and that's part of their terms of reference. But significantly, they're not going to be here to try and find out who committed the crime. So, it does appear that people may not get the sort of satisfaction from that foreign element of investigation that they're going to be looking for, and, and I'm sure that the government and President Musharraf was going to be batting questions on this issue for some time to come.

Stuart Loory 23:29

The, the, the matter of United States aid, billions of dollars, actually 10 billions of 10 billion since 9-11. This money, according to the stories that have been appearing lately, has not really been going to combat terrorism as much as it's been going to shore up Pakistan's military capabilities versus India. Bob Deans, what is the United States doing to try to correct that? If anything?

Bob Deans 24:13

Well, we don't know how effective it will be Stuart, of course, but that problem was identified and has been looked at by the, the National Security Council, at the White House, and in the State Department, they're trying to improve accountability, and Congress is, of course, attached some conditions to about \$50 million in aid for next year, saying that the State Department must certify that Pakistan Government is doing all it can to combat terrorism. Of course, that's, you know, not exactly a fail safe system, and I think it points to the, the problem that you, you have a country where last year there were a thousand people killed by suicide bombers and, and terror acts of the like Pakistan is struggling itself, facing a near existential crisis with terrorism. And, the greatest fear right now in this city is not \$50 million or even a billion dollars, and how it's used in the coming year in Pakistan, the biggest fear is that these elections will somehow be not seen as credible. This was the message that Senator Lieberman delivered to Musharraf yesterday in Islamabad, and this is a great concern here, going forward.

Stuart Loory 25:22

There, there is one other big problem with Pakistan, and of course, that is the, the question of nuclear weapons. It does have some nuclear stockpile, and there is some concern that this could fall into the hands of terrorists. Declan, is this a serious problem, or is this a matter of over concern in the Western world?

Declan Walsh 25:51

To be perfectly honest, it's difficult to say, like all nuclear programs in countries like this, it shrouded in a considerable amount of secrecy, so we don't know an awful lot about how Pakistan's nuclear program works exactly and specifically, what sort of controls are there in order to, to ensure that the weapons don't fall into the wrong hands in the event of a change of government or some sort of civil upheaval. But what we do know is that the U.S. has been giving considerable amounts of money over the last number of years to try and help Pakistan, to help Pakistani military, rather, to improve its safeguards. We understand that the nuclear weapons are kept in obviously, in several different locations. There's an estimated 40 to 50 warheads, and from my understanding of it, and listen, I must admit, I'm no expert, it's, it's not as simple as someone and taking hold of one facility and activating the, the keys to ignite a bomb. But of course, as the country goes through this period of, of great turmoil, and all of these questions are going to be examined very carefully, and I think that one of the great consequences of the death of Benazir Bhutto is that the power equation here has really changed very dramatically, and in a way that most people now fear, even political analysts feel, is very difficult to predict, and certainly in a country that's nuclear armed and that is called school wearing.

Stuart Loory 27:17

Okay, I have to say that we have run out of time. Pakistan has been living on the razor's edge of instability for most of its 60 years of independence. During that time, it has grown into a country where the instability has a serious impact on how the rest of the world lives, and unfortunately, there are few good ideas on how to deal with the problems. Our guests today have been in Islamabad, Naveed Ahmad of Geo Television, Karim Madad of Associated Press of Pakistan and Declan Walsh of the British newspaper The Guardian. And in Washington, Bob Deans, foreign affairs correspondent of the Cox Newspapers. Our director is Pat Akers and our producers, Cliff Ainsworth (ph), Hea... Heather Pernah (ph) and Kathy Wolf (ph). For all, I'm Stuart Loory. Global Journalist will be back next week.