

## **When Pakistan Sneezes, Afghanistan Catches a Cold**

**Author:** [IWPR Afghanistan](#)

As the death of Benazir Bhutto demonstrates, Pakistan and Afghanistan are joined together by more than geography.

Following last month's assassination of Benazir Bhutto, the former prime minister of Pakistan, the situation in Afghanistan took a rapid downturn. Food prices escalated, security deteriorated, and fragile hopes of peace began to slip away.

Afghans who keep an anxious eye on the political horse-trading that goes on across the border had high expectations of Bhutto's triumphant return to Pakistan in October, after her self-imposed eight-year exile.

At last, many said, political and military strongman Pervez Musharraf would be forced to share power, end martial law and institute some democratic reforms. Bhutto also made some strong statements about her commitment to stopping cross-border terrorism.

With her Pakistan People's Party poised to win a significant victory in the parliamentary election scheduled for January 8, Bhutto was in line to regain her old job at the head of the government, despite legal impediments to her doing so.

Having served two terms as prime minister, she was constitutionally barred from doing so again. She was also facing prosecution in Pakistan on charges of corruption.

But under a deal with Musharraf, Bhutto returned with a clean slate, and the clear agenda of regaining her authority and influence.

Her December 27 assassination put paid to any such hopes. The parliamentary ballot has been postponed to February 18, and although Musharraf has shed his general's epaulettes, he looks just as intent on retaining power as ever.

"Bhutto had stated that if she attained power, she would allow the American military to crack down on al-Qaeda and terrorism inside Pakistan," said Professor Wadir Safi, a lecturer in international relations at Kabul University's law faculty.

Afghanistan's leaders have long claimed that Pakistan exports terrorism across its porous border. Pakistan's unstable frontier areas lie in close proximity to Afghan territory, and there is mounting evidence that madrassas and militant training camps there preach jihad and prepare "holy warriors" for suicide missions on Afghan soil.

The presidents of the two nations have traded accusations over who is to blame for cross-border violence, but little has been done to address the problem.

Now, Safi predicts, "Bhutto's death will prolong the war in Afghanistan."

One immediate effect of Bhutto's assassination was that the Afghan economy took a blow.

With the mounting violence in Pakistan, food and other imports from that country have all but ceased. Pakistan has raised taxes on wheat exports, in an attempt to keep more foodstuffs available at home.

Since Afghanistan imports approximately 80 per cent of its wheat flour from Pakistan, this has caused a dramatic rise in the price of bread. The cost of a 100-kilogram sack of flour has more than doubled in recent weeks, from 1,300 to 2,800 afghani (56 US dollars).

As in many underdeveloped countries, bread is a diet staple in Afghanistan, and the crisis has hit most households hard.

Bhutto's promises to crack down on terrorism raised a wry smile from many Afghans, who remember the former prime minister as the willing midwife of the Taleban movement in the early to mid-Nineties.

"Bhutto played a key role in the establishment of the Taleban movement, which came into existence during her premiership," said Safi.

Bhutto was prime minister from 1988 to 1990 and from 1993 until 1996, the year the Taleban captured Kabul. Her government was one of only three to recognise the Taleban regime.

Paradoxically, this record gave more credibility to her more recent pledges to confront the militants, in Safi's view.

"Bhutto's pledges to eliminate the Taleban were of great importance, because she helped bring them into existence, and she knew all about their plans and actions," he said.

Fazel Rahman Oria, editor of Erada daily, concurred on this point, saying, "Mrs. Bhutto had the honour of being the mother of the Taleban, while Nasirullah Babar, who was Pakistani interior minister at the time, was the father," he said.

According to local political observers, Bhutto made a firm commitment to President Hamed Karzai during their last meeting - just hours before her death - to cooperate with the Afghan government in the fight against terrorism.

"It was difficult to believe her, however," said Oria. "When she was prime minister before, she did not seem all that concerned with the difficulties facing the Afghan government."

Oria voiced doubt that Bhutto would have been in a position to deliver had she won the post of prime minister.

“In practical terms, she could not have fulfilled those pledges, because a prime minister does not have the authority to do so,” he said. “It would take the army and the intelligence services to be able to do anything.”

Habibullah Rafi, a senior advisor at Afghanistan’s Academy of Sciences, agreed that the crisis in Pakistan would have grave consequences on his side of the border.

“Afghanistan has always been under the influence of its neighbour, and any deterioration in our situation has always been linked to Pakistan. But now Pakistan itself is experiencing a worsening situation,” he said.

Rafi places little stock in promises made by any leader in Islamabad.

“Musharraf, too, has made pledges, but nothing has come of them,” he said. “Therefore, we could not believe Bhutto, either. Promises made by Pakistani leaders will not do us any good until they change their policy regarding Afghanistan.”

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