

# RISING TALIBANI SATION

The suicide bomb attack on Bhutto is the latest evidence of the alarming spread of extremism across the country

By Hasan Zaidi in Karachi

Exactly who was behind the devastating suicide bomb attack on Benazir Bhutto's homecoming rally on October 18 in Karachi, which claimed the lives of over 143 people and wounded more than 545 others, is still shrouded in mystery. Opinion may be increasingly polarised in the country over the wisdom of the decision by the former premier and her Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) to push through with such a large procession despite clear and present danger. But one thing remains unambiguous and that is the threat to Pakistan from rising extremism.

The ongoing investigations point to the attack being carried out by one or more suicide attackers. In fact, Bhutto herself said she had received intelligence from "a brotherly country" before her arrival in Karachi that "four squads of suicide attackers" had been dispatched to Karachi to target her. That is why the vehicle she was travelling in from the airport had been fitted with blast-proof armour plates, bullet-proof glass and electronic jamming equipment that had been requested from—and provided by—the Government. One of Pakistan's most wanted militants, Baitullah Mehsud—accused of masterminding many recent suicide attacks—had also issued a threat to Bhutto through the press. For its part the Government had advised the former premier against a slow-moving procession—"where identifying potential bombers is difficult if not impossible", according to the provincial home secretary—and had offered to fly her from the airport to the rally grounds, which she had refused. PPP says it fears more suicide attacks on Bhutto's residence and the party headquarters at Bilawal House.

Since May 2002, when the first suicide bomb attack took place in Karachi targeting French naval personnel, there have been 56 suicide bomb at-



**THE MODERATE FACE:** (Above) Benazir visits an attack victim in a hospital; (Left) tribesmen during an anti-government rally in Miranshah

**143 dead, 545 injured in Karachi blast on Oct 18**



**Over 100 dead in July siege of Lal Masjid**



**There have been 56 suicide bomb attacks in the past five years alone mostly in the lawless tribal zones of north-west.**

tacks throughout Pakistan, according to Interior Ministry figures—most of them in the north-west of the country. They have all been linked in one way or other with Al Qaeda militants since the phenomenon itself was introduced in Pakistan after the American attacks on Afghanistan post 9/11. The ongoing army operation against militants in the north-western tribal areas bordering Afghanistan and the recent bloody crackdown on those holed up in Islamabad's Lal Masjid has triggered most of the recent attacks. That the attack on the PPP rally resulted in the largest number of casualties was simply because of the massive number of people present in the procession at that time.

But beyond the suicide attacks, which—until October 18—had mostly targeted the army, law enforcement personnel, ministers or Western installations like the US consulate in Karachi, another sinister wave of extremism is sweeping north Pakistan. Dubbed as "Talibanisation" of the north-west, it has seen attacks on innocuous targets like video and music shops—"spreading obscenity"—and even barbers who, according to the militants, "oppose Islamic law" by trimming beards. Beginning in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, this wave of obscurantism has now spread to parts of the North-West Frontier Province such as Malakand, Dir, Swat and Swabi. Militants from Islamabad's Lal Masjid had also attempted to enforce a similar code against music and video shops as well as massage salons in the federal capital before they were "taken out". Despite being condemned by the Government and many parts of civil society, attacks have become so commonplace that many businesses have either shut shop or their owners have switched to other trades.

Militancy has also been aided by a perception that the Pakistan Army is engaged in a war against its own people at the behest of the United States. More than 900 army men have lost their lives in the fight against militants in tribal areas—particularly Waziristan, where Mehsud and others are said to be hiding—and there seems to be no end to the warfare. American exhortation to Musharraf "to do more" has only fuelled the feeling in these



More than 900 soldiers have lost their lives battling militancy in tribal areas.



AFP

**LICENSED TO KILL: Pakistani soldiers patrolling Afghanistani border areas**

areas that an American agenda is at work despite the Government's repeated assertions that the fight against extremist elements is in the country's own interest.

In this context, the attack on Bhutto is not altogether surprising. Her return to Pakistan after eight years of self-imposed exile is increasingly seen in Pakistan as having been scripted by Western powers, particularly the Americans and the British. Her contacts with the US and the UK Government functionaries prior to the "deal" with General Pervez Musharraf have been widely reported in the media, as have US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's statements in her support. The Americans have especially been frustrated by Musharraf's inability to rein in the militants—whose support to the Taliban also threatens NATO's (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) efforts to quell violence in Afghanistan—and are fearful of the militancy spilling over and destabilising all of Pakistan. Although it still con-

siders Musharraf as its best bet, the General's plummeting popularity after the Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry fiasco and his lack of democratic legitimacy make the US uneasy about the future of Pakistan.

**A**merican and British diplomats in Pakistan seem to be sold on the idea that the only way of countering such a threat is for the "moderate forces" to come together to oppose extremism. With secular and liberal PPP still the largest "moderate force" in Pakistan, it was only natural for them to push both Musharraf and Bhutto towards each other, regardless of how such an arrangement might work out in the long term.

Bhutto has also vowed to "confront terrorists" and made it a point to stress that she entered into negotiations with a military ruler—against the long-standing principles of her party—because she saw rising extremism as a bigger threat to Pakistan's stability. Musharraf has said

as much in defence of his negotiations with a politician accused of "plundering the national exchequer". A mobile text message doing the rounds, takes jibes at both and presents the scenario as a film called *The Return of Phoolan Devi*, directed by Rice, scripted in London, produced by GHQ, adding, "action choreographed by Al Qaeda".

From all accounts, the Islamist militants now see Bhutto as an extension of Musharraf's regime. Given the PPP's impressive show of force in Karachi, expectations are rife that Bhutto would have a substantial stake in any future government, including the interim pre-election government scheduled to come into power by November 15 when the current assemblies complete their tenure. Prodded

by the Americans, it is also evident that the PPP has managed to patch up with another potent "moderate" force, the Muttaheda Qaumi Movement (MQM), which is closely allied to Musharraf and is a major player in the urban centres of Sindh.

Whatever else may be the difficulty Bhutto faces in any future set-up with Musharraf at the helm of the state, she is also bound to get a bitter first-hand experience of tackling militancy. She has claimed she had "tackled militancy successfully" in her previous two stints as prime minister and pointed out that only a democratic dispensation can hope to control the disaffection that breeds extremism. Most people in Pakistan would be hoping she is correct in her assessment despite the fact that some point out that the Taliban was formed in Afghanistan under her government's admitted tutelage in 1995. But she may find out that rolling back on an extremist mindset, when she herself was perceived as the enemy, may be a more difficult task than she had imagined. ■