

PERVEZ MUSHARRAF INDICTED FOR BENAZIR BHUTTO MURDER

Although he is already under house arrest for a number of other charges pending against him, Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's former military leader who took control of the government after ousting then (and once again, now) Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in a coup, was indicted today on three charges relating to the assassination in 2007 of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.

The charges were filed in the Anti-Terrorism Court in Rawalpindi. From Dawn:

"He was charged with murder, criminal conspiracy for murder and facilitation for murder," public prosecutor Chaudhry Azhar told AFP at the ATC in Rawalpindi hearing the case.

The six accused persons include former City Police Officer (CPO) of Rawalpindi Saud Aziz, the then SP Khurram Shahzad, Hasnain Gul, Rifaqat Hussain, Sher Zaman and Abdul Rasheed respectively.

Salman Masood and Declan Walsh provide more in the New York Times:

The sight of a once untouchable general being called to account by a court had a potent symbolism in a country that has been ruled by the military for about half of its 66-year history. While the military remains deeply powerful, the prosecution has sent the message that Pakistan's top generals are subject to the rule of law – at least after they have retired.

If only Stanley McChrystal and David Petraeus were called to account for their crimes. But I

digress.

The Times continues with interesting information on the basis of the charges against Musharraf:

The case against Mr. Musharraf is believed to rest largely on a statement by Mark Siegel, a Washington lobbyist and friend of Ms. Bhutto's, who says that Mr. Musharraf made a threatening phone call to her before she returned to Pakistan in October 2007. Ms. Bhutto was killed in a gun and bomb attack as she left a rally in Rawalpindi in December 2007.

Mr. Siegel said Ms. Bhutto had warned him in an e-mail that if she were killed, the blame should fall on four named people – a former director of the ISI spy service, a military intelligence agent, a political rival, and Mr. Musharraf.

It would appear that Siegel now bases his career on his former association with Bhutto and a book they wrote together just prior to her death. Here is more on the email at the heart of the case:

The sources said additional director of Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) Azad Khan went to the United States and recorded Mark Siegel's statement under section 161 in which he allegedly said that former president Pervez Musharraf had telephoned Benazir Bhutto and threatened her not to return before the general elections otherwise she would have to face dire consequences.

They said Mark Siegel also claimed that in her email in October 2007, which was originally meant for CNN's Wolf Blitzer, Benazir Bhutto named some persons who, according to her, would be responsible for her death if another attempt was made on her life after the bombing of

the Karsaz rally in Karachi on October 18 2007.

Wolf Blitzer received the email on October 26, 2007 through Mark Siegel in which Benazir Bhutto allegedly stated "On Oct 16, before returning home, I wrote a letter to Gen Musharraf in which I informed him that if anything happens to me as a result of these attacks, then I will neither nominate the Afghan Taliban, nor Al Qaeda, not even Pakistani Taliban or the fourth group. I will nominate those people who, I believe, mislead the people. I have spelt out names of such people in the letter. I have named three people, and more, in that letter to Gen Musharraf. I have named certain people with a view to the attack that took place yesterday so that if I was assassinated, who should be investigated."

Choosing Wolf Blitzer as the recipient of her dead man's switch email might have been poor judgment on the part of Bhutto. Had she chosen Declan Walsh, it seems to me he could have used his position with the New York Times to push for full exposure of Bhutto's concerns about Musharraf and could have provided much better context with his deep knowledge of Pakistan and its politics. The choice of Blitzer seems to have been choosing image over substance and could well have been a piece of Siegel's "advice".

Siegel refused to travel to Pakistan to make his statement. That would appear to have been a wise decision. Returning to the Times, we see that the chief prosecutor in the case was murdered:

But those prosecuting Mr. Musharraf have also faced mortal peril. In May, gunmen assassinated the chief prosecutor, Chaudhry Zulfikar Ali, as he drove to work from his home in Islamabad.

One suspect in that attack has been arrested.

From the BBC:

Police in Pakistan say they have arrested a man suspected of involvement in last month's murder of top prosecutor Chaudhry Zulfiqar Ali.

Mr Zulfiqar was shot dead in Islamabad on 3 May. He had been investigating the murder of former PM Benazir Bhutto.

Abdullah Omar was arrested in hospital where he was being treated for a bullet wound. Police say he was shot by Mr Zulfiqar's bodyguard during the attack.

The Bhutto case was not the only case Zulfiqar was working on and he had been threatened prior to his death:

He was also believed to be close to submitting final evidence against seven members of the Lashkar-e-Taiba militant group who are on trial for planning and executing the 2008 attacks in the Indian city of Mumbai in which 166 people were killed.

Mr Zulfiqar told the BBC in April that he had received death threats – mostly made over the telephone – related to the major cases he was pursuing in the courts.

In a remarkable twist, Abdullah Omar's father once tried to kill Musharraf:

He is the son of a retired army colonel who was court martialled 10 years ago for an attempt on the life of then President Pervez Musharraf. The BBC has been unable to reach the family of Mr Omar for any further comment.

Considering the previous attempt on Musharraf by his father and the subsequent court martial,

Omar would seem to fit better with LeT than with killing the prosecutor to protect Musharraf. At any rate, it seems likely there will be many more strange twists before the Musharraf saga ends. Most analyses of the development today place a very low likelihood of Musharraf actually going to jail over the charges, but at this point it still appears that the outcome is far from certain.