

Bhutto's death shrinks options in Pakistan

by *The Detroit News*

The assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto takes away the best option the United States had for facilitating a peaceful transition to democratic rule in Pakistan.

Now, the Bush administration is left with an unappetizing menu of choices. The United States has moved \$10 billion in aid through the regime of Gen. Pervez Musharaff, who is steadily turning away from democracy and toward dictatorship. Musharaff's suspension of Pakistan's constitution and hijacking of the Supreme Court has cost him support in the West.

Bhutto was encouraged by Washington to return from exile to participate in the Jan. 8 national legislative elections. She was a strong advocate for democracy, an ardent supporter of modernity and a courageous opponent of the Islamists. The hope was that a strong showing by her Pakistan People's Party would elevate her to prime minister, where she would serve as a moderating force in a power-sharing government with Musharaff. It was also hoped that her presence in the government would quiet the growing unrest in Pakistan, sparked by Musharaff's power grab.

Those hopes are now gone.

The other major opposition leader in Pakistan, former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, is a religious conservative who tried to impose Shariah law in the country. He has said he and his party will boycott the upcoming elections.

Sharif, if he were to prevail, couldn't be trusted to face down the Islamist militias who threaten the stability of the country.

The U.S. interest in Pakistan is undeniable. Pakistan is a nuclear-armed nation that would be a major destabilizing force if it fell to radicals.

It is also a stronghold for al-Qaida that has assisted the United States in pursuing the terrorist network.

And although the cooperation has been inconsistent, Pakistan is an essential ally in the war on terror.

So for now at least, the United States has little choice but to continue to shore up Musharaff while pressuring him to honor the constitution and the civil rights of the Pakistani people.

But backing an unpopular president risks pushing more Pakistanis into alliance with the extremists.

Pakistan has been called the most dangerous place in the world, and it was made even more so Thursday with the murder of Bhutto.

America's priority must now be keeping Pakistan from exploding until a new option can be found for preserving freedom in that country.

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