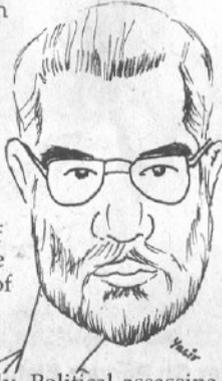


The politics of assassination

BY M.A. NIAZI

Two December attempts on the President seemed to presage a new horrific era of assassinations, but then there was a lull. However, then June saw an attempt on the Corps Commander Karachi, July that on the Prime Minister in-waiting and August on the Baluchistan Chief Minister. Meanwhile, in the background are the killings of jihadi religious scholar Mufti Shamzai, PML(N) leader Binyamin Rizvi and PPP leader Muzammil Suhrawardy. Political assassinations have come into fashion in a way unprecedented for Pakistan, yet they illustrate the bankruptcy of assassination as a political tool.



Assassination is murder, the difference being that the motive is political rather than personal. Former Punjab Chief Minister Ghulam Haider Wyne was probably killed in 1993 at the behest of local magnates who hated his guts, but it was an assassination because their motive was his political elimination. On the other hand, former West Pakistan Governor Amir Muhammad Khan of Kalabagh was killed in 1968 for family reasons, so though his death had major political significance for the district and perhaps the Punjab, it was essentially a murder. PPP stalwarts hold that the entire process of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's trial, conviction and execution constituted a 'judicial murder.' Since the alleged mastermind, Ziaul Haq, had no personal grievances, but derived political benefit, 'judicial assassination' would be a more accurate phrase.

The present spate of assassination attempts are new to Pakistan, but this has been a policy attempted before in other lands and times. One must exclude assassinations carried out by rival power groups who intend to exploit the resulting political situation, such as the assassination of Julius Caesar by Brutus and Cassius in 43 BC, or of the younger of the Syed brothers by Muhammad Shah Rangila in 1722. Also, deaths of leaders during coups d'état, such as Chile's Salvador Allende's in 1973 or Afghanistan's Nour Muhammad Taraki's in 1979, cannot be said to form a policy, even if intended rather than incidental.

An assassination policy can only be practised by a group with no other means of obtaining the political results it desires. Any group with some penetration into the power structure may use an assassination to remove one single overpowering irritant, but it is a

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their leading thinkers), the rival Communists took a different track, and ultimately achieved power. The Communists incorporated violence in their political methodology, but they did not bother with assassinations. They focused largely on peaceful means.

History, of course, deals with what happened, not with what might have happened, but in Pakistan it is still possible to guesstimate how things might have been had Liaquat Ali Khan or Ziaul Haq not been assassinated. Liaquat provided a huge cushion to popular aspirations, and it is possible that a constitution might have been finalised earlier, but he too was grappling with the problem that was the ultimate undoing of the pre-1958 regime: accommodating East Pakistan within a suitable federal structure. Liaquat probably did not have the political capital needed to force through a solution acceptable to the West Pakistani (mostly Muhajir and Punjabi) military and bureaucratic clique whose contempt of Bengalis was at the root of 1971. Ziaul Haq would probably have not been able to avoid party-based elections in 1988: the Supreme Court had ruled partyless elections unconstitutional even before he died. The 1988 elections would have yielded similar results, and the role assumed by Ishaq would have been played by Zia, with some variation of dates and timeframes, and even of people, but the course of events would probably have been roughly the same.

However, since neither of the perpetrators of these assassinations are known, it is possible that their political objectives were achieved. The CIA might resent having assassinations ascribed to it almost automatically, but its declared policy of assassinating foreign leaders if necessary makes it a suspect of last resort. The USA can be thought to have benefited from the departure of both Liaquat and Zia. There were any number of domestic players who benefited, and who might have been involved. Also, the conspirators may have failed to exploit the situation, perforce abandoning the fruit of their crime to others. Similarly, with the latest batch of assassination

have continued until the President chose another PM. If needed, the same Attock and Tharparkar seats would have been used to adjust a non-MNA, as a candidate's death renders election proceedings void. But the bottom line would have been Musharraf remaining in control, following a policy anathema to the assassins.

If something happened to Musharraf, the gap would be greater. But it too would be filled. In the existing political situation, it would be too much to expect the USA to keep its finger out of the pie. At that time, Zafarullah Jamali was PM, Soomro would have become Acting President and the VCOAS would have assumed acting charge as COAS. It would be left to the players to later decide whether they would be confirmed, or new persons inducted, but the business of state would continue. Except that there was no PM, there was a parallel situation in 1988 when Zia was assassinated. There is no reason whatsoever to suspect that Musharraf's absence would have changed government policy.

The politics of assassination is based on a mistaken perception: that it can change a political system. The removal of a single individual might have very important historical effects, but the system remains unchanged. To change a system requires huge effort. If many, many people make a little individual effort, which is coordinated collectively, it all adds up to that huge effort. It then provides the possibility of change. Alexander Ulyanov, a brilliant science student, wanted to change Russia. He joined an Anarchist plot to assassinate Czar Alexander III, which failed. He was hanged with his co-conspirators in 1887. His younger brother Vladimir, an equally brilliant law student, also wanted change, but chose a harder, more political path. Having changed his name to Lenin, he became the USSR's founding Communist leader 30 years after his brother's execution.

Wanting Pakistan to change sides in the War on Terror is a legitimate political objective. The MMA parties are working within the system for this end, with the broader goal of establishing an Islamic state in Pakistan. Other groups, like the Tanzeem Islami, Hizbut Tehrir and Al-Mujahiroun are working outside the system (with the broader goal of re-establishing the Caliphate), using peaceful political means, focusing on mobilising public opinion.

Whether they succeed, as Lenin did, or fail, as Gus Hall's CPUSA did, is besides the point. However, their chances of success are much greater than those who have attempted the recent assassinations. Those who might support such actions should consider the example of Lieutenant Istambouli, who assassinated

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An assassination policy can only be practised by a group with no other means of obtaining the political results it desires. Any group with some penetration into the power structure may use an assassination to remove one single overpowering irritant, but it is a tool used sparingly, for fear of retaliation.

Though one can hark back to the Hashashin of Hasan ibn Sabah, the original Old Man of the Mountain, which terrorised the Levant until the Mongols wiped them out, the most prominent modern example of a policy of assassination was that of the Anarchists in the straddling 19th and 20th centuries, which indicates the limits. Apart from successful attempts on lesser figures and successful ones on other heads of state, they got Czar Alexander II in 1881, the Austrian Empress Elizabeth in 1898 and US President William McKinley in 1901. Their aim was the revolutionary overthrow of all governments, and their replacement by some form of syndicalist grouping. They got nowhere, but in Russia, where their influence was greatest (with Bakunin and Kropotkin

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Similarly, with the latest batch of assassination attempts, their political results would not have been commensurate with the aim. These attempts emanate from a known quarter, though it would be something of an exaggeration to assume that they are organised by a single hierarchical organisation. Al-Qaeda is a network, open-ended in the sense that there is no admission procedure or formal membership; groups float in and drift out, depending on their needs coinciding with Al-Qaeda's ability to meet them.

The impact on the state structure of a successful assassination of the Corps Commander Karachi would have been minimal. After a certain amount of reshuffling, the Karachi Corps would have once again had a Commander. If Shaukat Aziz had been riding a right-hand drive car, Ch Shujat Hussain would

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Iraqi freedom fighters have been carrying out assassinations of collaborators, but that is not the focal activity in a general guerrilla campaign. It is a legitimate guerrilla weapon, because it contributes to the overall military goal, of forcing a withdrawal of occupation forces. However, it is a rather dubious political tool. It appeals to the desperate, the young, the impatient and the lazy, all of whom refuse to admit there is no alternative to long, hard political work, by large numbers out in the open rather than small groups hiding in cellars and attics, if you want to make a real difference.

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