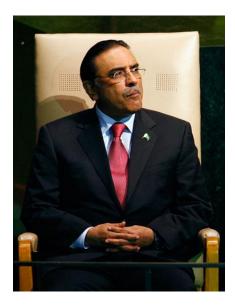
## **Obama's Murderous Guest**

by Fatima Bhutto



Mike Segar / Reuters

Besides ruining my country, I believe my aunt's husband, Pakistani President Zardari, orchestrated my father's murder. Is Obama really going to offer him billions more when they meet today?

Something rotten has arrived in Washington.

Today, President Barack Obama will shake hands and stage Oval Office photo ops for the first time with the man who many believe stole billions from the Pakistani treasury, empowered Pakistan's newly formed Taliban by imposing Shariah law without a vote or referendum, and whom I have publicly accused of orchestrating the murder of my father, Murtaza Bhutto, an elected member of parliament until he was killed in 1996.

Pakistan has been at war with its own people for a long time now—perhaps it's only natural that we move on to terrorizing the world at large.

My father was a vocal critic of both Pakistan's former prime minister, Benazir Bhutto (his sister, my aunt), and her husband, current president Asif Zardari. He called Zardari and his cronies "Asif Baba and the 40 thieves," and spoke out against the targeted killings of opposition members and activists by the state's police and security forces. In the end, my father was slain in an extrajudicial assassination. The fact that he was seen, in a traditionally patriarchal society, as the heir to the Bhutto legacy didn't make him any safer as Benazir's second government began to lose power and international repute.

Now in Washington, the man who helped this happen will ask for money and the chance to cling to his dwindling power. Obama, in turn, will ask for results. That's going to be a problem. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has called the situation in my country a threat to universal peace. Richard Holbrooke, Obama's special envoy for Pakistan, has said our government is capable of fighting terror, but he also calls the region "AfPak" so he's probably confused. President Obama hasn't offered much of an opinion yet. He has noted that the civilian government has failed to provide its citizens with the most basic services. But he's also suggested that some hard cash might help the Zardari government through its problems. No, it won't.

Pakistan has been at war with its own people for a long time now—given the daily politics of persecution that the state machinery inflicts on its own citizens, perhaps it's only natural that we move on to terrorizing the world at large. The Taliban is waiting at the gates. They are making inroads into the Punjab, the heart of the country, slowly but steadily. Swat has fallen. Buner district is gone, airstrikes or no airstrikes. Now this government has to go. It's either them or Pakistan.

President Zardari is a man with a colorful history. He is known by many endearing epithets here in Pakistan: Mr. 10 Percent (a reference to kickbacks), Mr. 50 Percent, the First Spouse (twice), and President *Ghadari*, or "traitor" in Urdu. I might not be the right person to tell his story, given that I believe he was involved in my father's murder. But, then again, I just might be in the best position to warn President Obama about him.

Last summer, as an odious bill called the National Reconciliation Ordinance expunged from his prison record the four murder cases pending against him—my father's included—as well as various national and international corruption cases, Zardari prepared himself for power. He did so not only by wiping his criminal slate clean, but also by distancing himself from medical records that showed him to be "a man with multiple and severe physical and mental-health problems," according to the Financial Times.

When Obama meets Zardari in Washington, he should remember that he is meeting not only with a dangerous man, but with an unelected official. Zardari never stood for elections in Pakistan. He has no constituency, no vote of support from the people, no democratic mandate. The "opposition," the Pakistan Muslim League, is run by Zardari's frenemy, Nawaz Sharif, also unelected—Pakistan, a nation of 180 million people, is at the mercy of two unelected men. President Obama has to decide this week whether he wants to foster democracy in Pakistan, or whether he wants to have a pliable government in power—a government, it bears noting, that is so inept it managed to grow a local Taliban.

Lest we forget, when Zardari took power last September, Pakistan didn't have an indigenous Taliban. Now, a year into his rule, the Tehreek-e-Taliban not only exists in Pakistan, but controls the Northwest Frontier Province, frighteningly close to the Afghan border. The reason Pakistan's government cannot fight the Taliban is not because Pakistan doesn't have the money to fight terror. We do, plenty of it. By my last count, we've received some \$12 billion in military aid over the last eight years. (It may not have gone where it was supposed to go, however. It might have ended up in someone's Swiss bank account—no names, but we can guess.) And it's not

because Pakistanis are rabid fundamentalists elated by the arrival of an indigenous Taliban. That's not it at all. Pakistan is a religiously diverse country—we have a history of Buddhist, Sikh, and Hindu heritage.

The reason is the leadership. It's just not working. In the year that Zardari has been president, Pakistan has become a third front in the war on terror. We are not safer, our neighbors are not safer, and we have not made any strides toward fighting fundamentalism.

As much as America finds President Zardari repellent, we in Pakisan do, too. But you made him our president, and now you're about to give him billions of dollars in aid. We cannot foster any democratic alternatives to Zardari while his government gets bucketloads of American money. Local activists, secular parties, and nascent opposition groups can't fight that kind of money—it's impossible to compete with a party that has access to billions of dollars. Pakistan is at a crossroads. We are either going to save our country from its descent into fundamentalism and lawlessness, or we are going to have Zardari as president, bolstered by American aid and support. The ball is in President Obama's court today. Let's hope he makes the right decision.

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