



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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Weekly Digest 12/24 – 12/31

Legislation

No legislation last week as Congress was out of session.

Committee Hearings

No committee meetings last week.

In Washington

U.S. Policy Toward Pakistan After Bhutto: Nearly everyone in Washington has weighed in on how the U.S. should react to the Bhutto assassination, with many arguing that the U.S. “must seek policies that quell turmoil and [push democracy and stability](#),” and that the “days of Washington [mortgaging its interests](#) there to one or two individuals must finally come to an end.” An editorial argues that Bhutto’s strategy, “a real fight against terrorism that would give jihadists no rest, and a real democracy that would give them no fake grievance – looks to be the [only formula](#) by which Pakistan may yet be saved.”

But one analyst [dismisses the desire for democracy](#) in Pakistan as a “fantasy,” claiming that the Pakistani population is sympathetic to al-Qaeda and hostile to Western interests and to democracy, concluding that “For the United States, the question is whether we learn nothing from repeated, inescapable lessons that placing democratization at the top of our foreign policy priorities is high-order folly.” Others [disagree](#), noting the low and decreasing popularity of Islamist parties within Pakistan, observing that “it’s hard to blame Pakistanis” for not seeing President Bush as “the face of democracy,” given the strong support of the Bush administration for Musharraf’s authoritarian regime. One article wonders if Condoleezza Rice is [playing too strong a role](#) in determining Bhutto’s PPP successor.

Some wonder whether the Bush administration even has a [Plan B](#) or a [Plan C](#) after Bhutto. One observer warns against rushing back into the arms of Pakistan’s strongman, **President**

Pervez Musharraf, which could end up [burying Pakistan's democracy](#) along with Benazir Bhutto, while others claim that “in the short term, the United States has no choice other than to [support Musharraf](#).”

Immediately following Bhutto's death, **Chairman Tom Lantos** (D-CA) of the House Committee on Foreign Relations [called for a renewed U.S. commitment](#) to “the people of Pakistan and the voices of moderation” in the wake of this “atrocious attack,” which was quickly condemned worldwide by a wide variety of [governments including the U.S., Russia, and Iran](#). Fellow Pakistani opposition leader **Nawaz Sharif** was [quick to blame](#) President Musharraf, as were [some American commentators](#). Several analysts have also questioned whether the crisis in Pakistan will spill over into Afghanistan and [lead to turmoil](#) elsewhere in the region.

Also Worth Reading

At *FP Passport*, **Blake Hounshell** describes the [U.S. State Department's “woes,”](#) arguing that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have only exacerbated the preexisting problem of budgeting shortfalls. He cites [an article](#) by **Mark Johnson** in this month's *Foreign Service Journal* which provides data to illustrate the “critically understaffed” department's “snowballing deficit.”

In the Middle East

The Bhutto Assassination and Its Aftermath in Pakistan: Pakistan was rocked this week by [the assassination](#) of Pakistani People's Party (PPP) leader and former Prime Minister **Benazir Bhutto** during a political rally in Rawalpindi. Bhutto was shot and also targeted by a suicide bomb blast that killed more than thirty of her supporters at the rally. Many noted the [void left behind](#), while [opinions varied](#) as to what's next for Pakistan. Several commentators [argued](#) that the elections scheduled for January [should be postponed](#) to allow the PPP to regroup and to permit for a more democratic contest, but [others claim](#) that the “way to honor Bhutto's legacy is for Musharraf to pick up her banner of relentlessly trying to bring back democracy to Pakistan,” by holding elections as scheduled. But some fear that Pakistan has already [lost the opportunity](#) for the peaceful transfer of power. One article surveys the [possible fate of elections](#) in the absence of the Pakistani political leader who recently enjoyed the [most popular support](#).

Many observers [praised Bhutto](#) for “[her unwavering devotion to democracy](#),” while others [criticize](#) Bhutto's “recklessness,” and remember her rule as marked by [corruption, ruthlessness, and nepotism](#), seen as carrying on with her 19-year-old son's [ascendance to lead](#) the PPP. Many agree that “In her death, as in her life, Benazir Bhutto has drawn attention to the need for building a [moderate Muslim democracy](#) in Pakistan.” POMED's **Shadi Hamid** writes that the threat of Islamist control of [nuclear weapons](#) is not the overriding danger that some see, as extremists may have the power to threaten and terrorize but they are not on the verge of a takeover. He also writes that the Middle East will remain a [powder keg](#) with

frequent destabilizing events such as Bhutto's assassination until the problems of "economic, political, religious, and cultural stagnation" that produce extremism are resolved.

Shifting Political Scene in Iraq: One observer notes how military success in the form of decreased violence in Iraq highlights the need for more [political success](#) and looks at U.S. plans to encourage such progress. Another examines the little-reported, [recently formed alliance](#) between **Tareq al Hashemi**, head of the Sunni Iraqi Islamic Party, and the two major Kurdish parties, led by **Jalal Talabani** and **Masoud Barzani**, while the [political and military struggle](#) between Iraqi Shiite leaders **Muqtada al Sadr** and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq's **Abul Aziz al Hakim** continues. And another commentator [draws attention](#) to statements from Iraqi government officials indicating their distrust of paramilitary Sunni Awakening Councils.

Lebanese Stalemate Carries on into 2008: Difficulties remain as Lebanon's political forces [struggle to reach agreement](#) on how to amend the constitution to allow consensus candidate **General Michel Suleiman** to become president, making yet another postponement of elections likely. A year-end editorial argues that "[Lebanon's heartless politicians are betraying its hapless people](#)," and it blames politicians on both sides for the current impasse, noting that "No one – Lebanese or foreign - can rule this country alone. Those who would dispute this fact are victims of their own delusions or someone else's." One Lebanese commentator proposes that reforms toward removing sectarianism from the Lebanese political system [begin with the judiciary](#). Meanwhile, an American analyst argues that the U.S. does not have [a foreign policy strategy](#) in Lebanon willing to acknowledge the country's new political reality.

Also Worth Reading

Julien Barnes-Dacey writes in the *Christian Science Monitor* that "[President Bashar al-Assad's economic liberalization policies have spurred many Syrian-Americans...to leave their comfortable American lives and return to Syria](#)." One such returnee comments that "There are tremendous opportunities right now in Syria. Things economically are accelerating rapidly and every day there are new unorganized opportunities." Moreover, the article describes how "New laws are easing over 40 years of private investment restrictions, opening up most economic sectors to private capital, dramatically loosening Syria's tight foreign exchange regulations, and rationalizing tax rates." However, "readapting to life in the Arab world has been difficult for some" because "After years in the US, many have come to love a country widely condemned in the Arab world." One Syrian-American says, "I tell them that if you live in America you can never find as good a place in terms of lifestyle, freedom, options, and opportunities. There is no place on earth like America. Forget politics – in terms of the human condition and the living environment you cannot find a place like the U.S."