

Descent into chaos

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If we think the militants will quietly retreat into their holes after the military mows them down, then we are big fools. When I say "we" I mean the ordinary Pakistanis. As I sit down to begin this column, the walls of my house shake and the window panes tremble. Suddenly the 24/7 prattle about judges' restoration on my TV channel is interrupted by 'breaking news.' For once the 'breaking news' warrants immediate attention. The Rawalpindi cantonment has been hit.

Ahmed Rashid must feel like an oracle, a deity of sorts among the westerners watching him dissect the Taliban saga. The last time he was heard of was from Canada where he had gone with his latest book: "Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia."

The Lahore-based author has an uncanny ability to show the future long before it hits us. He became the darling of the American media immediately after 9/11 with his book "Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia." The likes of Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld chased him around looking for advice on what to do next. The biggies in the Bush Administration stalked Rashid, a man unheard of on Capitol Hill until the attack on World Trade Centre. Suddenly Ahmed Rashid became a star, a guru, a pundit making all the talking heads on US television channels and the nattering 'security analysts' look like dummies. They came across as wimps. This chosen lot may be paid millions, but this bunch is as ignorant about affairs in our part of the world as say, the man on the American street. Had it not been for 9/11, Yale University Press would never have published Rashid's book. In 2000, no US publisher wanted to print it because Afghanistan didn't excite the Americans. The subject was not sexy enough.

Last month I met Ahmed Rashid at a dinner in Islamabad. He told me about his new book. Why was he going west to launch it? I asked. "It's too explosive. They may not be able to take it," he said in a serious voice. Ah, yes, I forgot what happened to Ayesha Siddiqi exactly a year ago after she had the courage to take on the army with her book "Military Inc." The generals went berserk and hounded her out of the country. She fled to London and took sanctuary. Rashid didn't want a repeat. He didn't want to cross swords with the powerful ISI, which is the villain of the piece in his book "Descent into Chaos."

Well, the good news is that Asif Zardari, our man of the moment, likes Ahmed Rashid. He invited him for lunch at his home in Islamabad. They talked for two hours. It must have been a great debriefing on the shape of things to come. Zardari's basics on the Taliban must have been brushed up with Rashid providing a crash course on how to battle the enemy within. Since Army Chief Kayani had declared that the democratic government would henceforth handle all the hot button issues, one naturally looked to the PPP head to convert Zardari House into a battle headquarter and monitor the attack on the militants with Zardari in the lead.

No such luck.

The Taliban have arrived at the gates of Peshawar. But Asif Zardari has gone missing. Currently, he's away lecturing on security issues to the Turks and the Europeans. AZ times his tours abroad beautifully. More significantly, he does not leave anyone in charge to mind the store while he's gone. The Gilani government, hobbled with half its ministries vacant, is there for cosmetic effect. Rahman Malik, the unelected security czar does not have the wherewithal for fighting the Taliban. He lived in exile and came last October with Benazir Bhutto to Pakistan. But for the NRO - a personal gift from President Pervez Musharraf - Bhutto, Zardari and Malik would still be fugitives from the law.

Rahman Malik was Benazir's political, financial and security whiz kid all these long years. When Zardari assumed the PPP throne, he bequeathed the ministry of interior to his longtime loyalist. Many worried that Mr Malik's specialty in security was outdated, considering that the ground realities had drastically changed while Malik was away. Granted that as General (r) Naseerullah Babar's lieutenant in the ministry of interior during Benazir's time, Rahman Malik helped with the birth of the Taliban, midwived by Babar and the ISI, still, Al-Qaeda was yet to be born in our tribal

areas. Managing this slippery cell now may require more expert hands than Malik's who at the end of the day is a politician not a security sharpie.

Nonetheless, Pakistanis were glad to see the end of suicide bombings once Rehman Malik took charge of our security. He told us we were safe because the new government – democratic to its core – would ink new deals of friendship and fraternity with the militant groups. Sure enough, the suicide bombings stopped and one took a respite from terrorism and its perpetrators.

Meanwhile the judges' issue festered like an ugly sore and Rehman Malik's attention was diverted to keeping the thousands marching into Islamabad away from mischief. He performed well and the masses dispersed without anyone getting hurt. Elsewhere, the regrouping of the militants was taking place, rearing its ugly head and eyeing Peshawar. Mr Malik has only one pair of eyes and ears. He's not a bionic man with superman's agility to swoosh around flashpoints and pluck them out. The bottom line: get help!

Re-enter Ahmed Rashid. For starters all his phones are bugged and his emails shared by the intelligence agencies. In conversation with Amy Goodman of "Democracy Now" Rashid recently said that the billions given to Pakistan by America were spent on the most sophisticated surveillance equipment to track down the militants. "Some of this equipment is used for that, but the bulk of the equipment is used for two things. It's being used to monitor Musharraf's political opponents and journalists." Rashid said that three months after 9/11, America told Musharraf: "Look you go after Al-Qaeda, get as many Arabs as you can. We will reward you if you do that. We're not bothered about the Taliban. You can do what you like with the Taliban."

In his book, Ahmed Rashid documents the story of Kunduz, in the north-eastern Afghanistan. American troops had surrounded 8,000 Taliban, Arab and Pakistani forces in November 2001. The Pakistanis were the ISI. At Musharraf's request, the Americans allowed Pakistan to airlift its people out. According to Rashid, "Hundreds of ISI officers, Taliban commanders and foot soldiers belonging to the IMU (an Uzbekistan guerrilla group) and AlOQaeda personnel boarded the planes."

"Once the Taliban started streaming into Pakistan, retreating into Pakistan, they (Pakistan army) again started housing and looking after the Taliban," Rashid told his interviewer Amy Goodman.

Apart from the money pumped into the militants by pro-Musharraf agencies, drug money is the in thing nowadays. Western forces are in "denial about Afghanistan's opium production, which today produces more heroin than the world can consume," says "The Times" writer Richard Beeston. "Opium production is now Afghanistan's biggest industry, leading to massive government corruption that has spread right to the president's closest advisors and even members of his family. Some of the profits are being diverted to fund Taliban military operations." Reviewing Rashid's book, Beeston concludes: "It will not be of much comfort to read about the missed opportunities in Descent into Chaos, but perhaps those involved in the fight might avoid repeating the same mistakes."

And this is exactly my point. Can we stop making the same mistakes and move on? Can Secretary Negroponte, George W Bush's messenger stop enriching Pervez Musharraf and his allies who in turn are enriching the Taliban? Can Rahman Malik stop the photo-ops that he loves and instead move to Peshawar and monitor the military operation and can Asif Zardari stop his drawing room chats – at home and abroad – and for God's sake be honest and sincere to the people of Pakistan who have wisely or foolishly put all their trust in him once again?

More of Ahmed Rashid in the weeks ahead.

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