

*Interviewing a former colleague is an odd feeling, but Pakistani writer Ahmed Rashid is not an ordinary former colleague. He's one of the finest chroniclers of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia. When the Soviets occupied Afghanistan and the Mujahideen resisted them with US-supplied weapons, Rashid was there, warning the world of the catastrophe that lay ahead. His tone got darker over the years and once the Taliban was firmly entrenched in Kabul, he reminded us of the regime's inhumanity. When the US attacked Afghanistan, after Sept 11, 2001, Rashid saw an opportunity for peace and security, but the Bush administration had other priorities. Today, Afghanistan is perilously close to another disaster. In his marvellous new book, Descent into Chaos: How the war against Islamic Extremism is being lost in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, Rashid presents a characteristically apocalyptic picture in which no one emerges with any honour: it is a gallery of venal, corrupt, incompetent, brutal, and self-serving leaders, cynically manipulating their populations. Yet, Rashid is slightly optimistic that under a new US administration, real change may be possible. Excerpts from the interview:*

**Let us start with Peshawar. What's going on? Is it lost?**

The Pakistani Taliban occupies most of FATA (Federally-Administered Tribal Areas, near the Durand Line separating Afghanistan and Pakistan). They are steadily taking over areas in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and are in control of small towns and villages. They are decapacitating the State, and making local government, bureaucracy, and administration irrelevant. Some Taliban have been seen within three miles of Peshawar. The Awami National Party (which

governs that area) has been begging the army to push them back. The Taliban has come to the town, kidnapped people, harassed women, and attacked girls going to school. The police are helpless. It's only because of a domestic outcry that the army has moved, but it's doing it half-heartedly. Paramilitary forces have gone in, and just pushed them back ten miles. Because of this half-hearted approach, the State is paying a huge price, as we lose more sovereignty.

**And this is not being helped by the talk of a pullout among European forces, and the concern within Britain that the casualties are now unsustainable.**

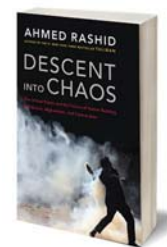
# 'People believe the State exists when lights burn'

Ahmed Rashid's book strikes a dark, despairing note but he has not quite given up on peace in Central Asia, finds **SALIL TRIPATHI**



**Dark tomes** Ahmed Rashid writes about the mess in Afghanistan

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**DESCENT INTO CHAOS**  
Ahmed Rashid  
Penguin  
544 pp; Rs 495

This is a strategic time for the Taliban to consolidate itself. It realises that there is a lame duck presidency in Washington and there are weak governments in Islamabad and Kabul. So they (the Taliban) want a major debacle. It could be the takeover of a major city in Afghanistan, and creating an alternative government. Their second aim is to attack and kill soldiers from the wavering NATO countries. Italy, Spain, and Germany. There is enormous domestic public opposition in those countries to their troop deployment in Afghanistan. Taliban wants to unravel the NATO. Therefore the next few months are crucial for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

**Where does that leave Pakistan? It has a dysfunctional government, with the Pakistan Muslim League and the Pakistan People's Party in an uneasy coalition, and Pervez Musharraf as President, who cannot be ruled out of any equation.**

This is a very difficult period for the civilian government. It has inherited the debris of Musharraf — the Martial Law, its consequences on the constitution, the treatment of the lawyers, the sacking of the judges, all of that has to be sorted. Infighting has paralysed the government on both fronts — countering terrorism and managing the economy. There is only squabbling! The civilian government and its institutions are not able to encroach on the army's prerogatives. The army continues to control the foreign policy. The civilian government has not taken the threat of terrorism as seriously as Benazir Bhutto did.

**Does the general still matter?**

Bush has committed his support to him. Bush's point is: I don't dump my friends and allies, no matter what. Musharraf still has enormous power: he can appoint the prime minister, sack the government, institute Martial Law again, and he can do all of that with the United States and the army backing him.

**You are also kind towards Afghan President Hamid Karzai, when the perception is that he's a weak and ineffective ruler.**

The picture of Karzai is one of disappointment. Karzai's problem is that here was a man that Afghanistan needed: he was clean, not corrupt, he was from Pashtun royal blood, and he was not a warlord. His indecisiveness and over-reliance on the tribal system, and his resistance to building a team of experts around him, led to his undoing. He also resisted ideas of modern governance, of strengthening the bureaucracy, administration and Parliament. But he

remains the only leader with broad, cross-ethnic support.

**I've seen what Paddy Ashdown achieved as the High Representative in Bosnia-Herzegovina, with the international community spending huge amounts of money to build physical and soft infrastructure. Today, Bosnia-Herzegovina is at peace, even though tensions remain. Do you think Afghanistan should have had a similar commitment?**

The idea of trusteeship would not have worked in Afghanistan. And Paddy Ashdown was unacceptable because he was far too independent. The problem with Afghanistan was that totally inadequate resources were given after 2001, because the Americans were preparing for Iraq.

**So is Afghanistan lost?**

I still think that the Afghan win-

(laughs). But the State can help build infrastructure. Electricity generation is highly symbolic. When a family sees lights at home, when lights burn across Kabul, people believe the State exists. It's doing something right. **And does India matter in this equation?**

I fear that the Indo-Pak conflict of Kashmir has now moved to Kabul. The Pakistani military says India has taken over Afghanistan, but that is absurd! Pakistan has this perception that India is in Afghanistan, that it is backing the Balochistan insurgency and the Taliban... the war in Afghanistan is not a war about one country. This is a regional phenomenon: There is the Pakistani Taliban, the Sunni Taliban of Iran, and soon there will be an Indian Taliban, unless you watch out.

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## **The Bush administration can't chew gum and walk at the same time: how would it fight two wars? With McCain, we'll get more of the same**

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dow of opportunity, while it is 90 percent shut, is open slightly.

There is deep cynicism in Afghanistan towards the West because of the West's failure to deliver. But they (the Afghans) don't want the Taliban back. So we must apply the right resources, troops, and provide reconstruction where needed. I was in Kabul recently and it gets four hours of power every alternate night. This cannot go on. There is no industry, no job creation, though project proposals are pending.

**You can build a factory, but unless there is a market for those goods, those factories will collapse. State-led economic interventions ultimately fail.**

You're right; bureaucrats cannot think of economics. You should have been there to advise them

**You mean, Taliban as a metaphor.**

Yes, I mean Islamisation and extremism. All of us face the danger of extremist militia; we must settle Afghanistan first. It cannot be done unless the Pakistani army breaks the habit of giving sanctuary to these outfits. India has to play a meaningful role, and unless it does so, the region is doomed.

**At the Tehelka Summit, Imran Khan blamed NATO's indiscriminate bombing for the crisis.**

It is very sad to see Imran Khan becoming an apologist of fundos. Americans and the NATO were indiscriminate, but now their targeting is much better. Civilian casualties are down significantly, and we should give credit where it is due. You have to recognise the Taliban threat in FATA and

stop harbouring the Afghan Taliban. Instead, Imran Khan is legitimising the Pakistani Taliban. **Is Imran merely playing to the anti-American mood?**

Americans have made many mistakes but look at Pakistan and Afghanistan, too. You cannot blame the West for everything.

**What would you do to change the situation in Afghanistan?**

It has to happen at the international level. You need an American president who is engaged. This administration can't chew gum and walk at the same time: how would it fight two wars at the same time? With (Arizona Senator John) McCain (the Republican candidate) we will get more of the same. With (Illinois Senator Barack) Obama (the Democratic candidate)...

**But Obama has backtracked, saying he will not withdraw troops from Iraq if the generals say it is undesirable. Closer to the election, Obama will portray himself as "presidential"; that means more of the same too.**

You're right; with Obama too we may not get too much, but he has spoken to experts. My fear is, McCain will only focus on Iraq. You need a change in that thinking. The American establishment now recognises that Afghanistan is a threat and can destabilise much more than itself. This lot (the Bush administration) wanted to fight the war and get out fast. They were not interested in Afghanistan; from the first day (9/11) the interest was to get Iraq. They were outsourcing their commitments. They asked Musharraf to get Al Qaeda. They asked the warlords to bring peace. They ran the war through contracts. Everything was parceled out. Jobs were given out. That way you lose control. This was a government of contracts. Contractors became the biggest players. Everything was outsourced.