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BOOKS

Lunch with Karzai

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The otherwise rich account falls prey to the idea that the current dilemma is one governed by the wrong people in office.

NEWS comes almost daily from Afghanistan about the tenuous nature of the state run by Hamid Karzai's tattered coalition backed by the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Karzai's writ runs barely beyond the outskirts of Kabul, which has itself been turned into an architectural monstrosity, equal parts slum, NGOland and warlord kitsch. The countryside is overrun by warlords, by drugs and by the return of the Taliban. Provincial cities have their own warlords in charge of accumulation and justice. The U.S.-NATO forces have teams of social workers-soldiers-spies (Provincial Reconstruction Teams) on the ground and powerful bombers in the air. But the power equation across the country does not favour the aims of the U.S.-NATO occupation.

For one, it is by now an established fact that the failure of the Karzai government and the resilience of the Taliban have given the latter an advantage. It is equally clear that the Taliban would not be in such a position without some kind of shadow state assistance from Pakistan. Things are at such a bad pitch that Karzai now threatens "hot pursuit" into Pakistan's border region and scolds the U.S. openly for its brazen bombardment of Afghan civilians. Karzai, who failed to form and grow a political party, stands alone, on a precipice, teetering.

Six weeks before 9/11, the Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid hosted Karzai at his home in Lahore. They ate lunch and talked politics. Rashid, who had written one of the few well-documented books on the Taliban (for Yale University Press in 2000), has long been an advocate (from his perch in *Far Eastern Economic Review*) of a more humane Afghanistan. After the Soviet withdrawal, the country spiralled into chaos, with warlords battling each other, using the hardware left behind by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the software given them by the Saudi Jihadis (and the Pakistani Deobandis). Rashid, who covered Afghanistan since the time of the Soviet invasion in 1979, bemoaned the emergent consensus not only from Islamabad, but also from Riyadh and Washington, that peace in the country could be sought via the Taliban. The Pakistanis were drawn to these young men who hailed from the Pashtu-speaking region largely because they believed that the Taliban would be their proxy. The Saudis were happy to support an anti-Shia, pro-Wahabi/pro-Deobandi

organisation. In addition, the Saudis and the U.S. were happy that the Taliban was decidedly anti-Iran. There was also the matter of a UNOCAL oil pipeline, which is why Ahmed Rashid's cry from the heart was subtitled *Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*. Karzai, unlike Rashid, was willing to put himself, briefly, at the service of the Taliban, work for a bit with UNOCAL, and hope that Pakistan, where he lived for a time, would do the right thing for his homeland.

In 1999, the Taliban (perhaps with the connivance of the Inter-Services Intelligence) murdered Karzai's father, Abdul Ahad Karzai, making Hamid Karzai head of the Popalzai tribe. Karzai defied the Taliban by leading a 300-vehicle convoy of exiled Afghans to the family seat of Kandahar. The Taliban, as Rashid writes in his new book, "scowled but dared not intervene, fearing that an all-out civil war could erupt". Rashid does not say so, but Hamid Karzai leaned on a tradition of defiance and reverence that includes the funeral corsage of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the Frontier Gandhi, whose death in 1988 occasioned a similar, but much grander, cessation of hostilities to allow the body of this 98-year-old legend to rest in Kandahar.

Karzai's act, Rashid underscores, earned him the respect of the grizzly veterans of too many wars, and of the hoary tribal chiefs. When he made his appearance in late 2001 after the Taliban cadre fled into their redoubts, he was not an unknown to the Afghan people. They recognised him for his 1999 act and for his brave return to the country with a few fighters and a satellite phone (with direct numbers to the Americans who mattered) as U.S. warplanes began to pummel Taliban positions and the Afghan lifeworld. When Rashid had lunch with Karzai before all this, the Afghan had been asked to leave Pakistan, perhaps at the behest of the Taliban. He told Rashid that he did not want to abandon his people, his networks. The 9/11 attack was as much his opportunity as it was for the Bush administration: they wanted a quick victory in Afghanistan followed by one in Iraq, while he wanted the Taliban removed more than just Osama bin Laden handed over to the U.S.

Destiny linked the interests of Washington and Karzai; the former removed the Taliban from Kabul, handed the reins to Karzai and tried to downscale to build up for the Iraq war. Karzai was not up to the task. Ahmed Rashid, a loyal friend, very kindly but quite pointedly, shows us how Karzai failed. His alliance with the warlords, his failure to build a political party, his temerity in the face of Washington – all this is important, and it is given its due place by Ahmed Rashid.

Descent into Chaos reads like another lunch date between Karzai and Rashid. The author annotates the descent fairly clinically. Karzai is portrayed as a decent man caught between unbridgeable odds. Funny, therefore, that early in the book Ahmed Rashid can have such contempt for the Marxist attempts in the late 1970s and early 1980s. They attempted, he says, "unrealistic land and educational reforms in a conservative and tribal-based Muslim society".

If this is so, then the critique of Karzai is misplaced. He fell prey to tribalism and warlordism, and did not move an agenda for literacy and land reform. Ahmed

Rashid calls this the “path of least reconstruction”. Karzai, in other words, tried to be, in Rashid’s terms, realistic. His failings are that he did everything the Marxists did not do: respect warlordism, respect the mullahs, respect tribal leaders, and eschew any kind of agenda that might produce the seeds for sustainable social development (the lack of this, therefore, has led to the booming opium economy which, with NGO and foreign aid money, sustains the country). Ahmed Rashid prods his friend here and there, but on balance does not see Karzai’s failings as fundamental.

It’s about Pakistan

Ahmed Rashid’s target lies elsewhere, closer to his Lahore home. *Descent into Chaos* has the merit of being more than a book about Afghanistan. It is equally a book about the Central Asian republics, mainly Uzbekistan, and Pakistan. Rashid had earlier catalogued the failures of the five Central Asian republics that were carved out of the Soviet Union in *Jihad* (2002). Nepotistic and brutally autocratic regimes repressed all dissent, including that grounded in the traditional, heterodox Islam of the region. Out of this brew emerged a toxic form of jihad, sponsored by the usual suspects, but, as Ahmed Rashid put it there, with “no economic manifesto, no plan for better governance and the building of political institutions, and no blueprint for creating democratic participation in the decision-making process of their future Islamic state”.

These groups, which soon became affiliates of Al Qaeda out of instinct and futility, end up with a nihilistic agenda, a hateful social programme. In this new book, Ahmed Rashid nods only to Uzbekistan, which is the poster child for the failure of the Bush policy after 9/11. Ruled by Islam Karimov, a particularly unsavoury character, Uzbekistan cleverly sold off its pretensions for sovereignty by giving the U.S.-NATO whatever it needed for the war on Afghanistan with the proviso that foreign aid return and no one say anything about the police state run by Karimov’s regime within the country. Bush’s team eagerly made the deal.

What happened in Uzbekistan is a précis of what happened on a much larger scale in Pakistan. Which is why this is a book about Pakistan. For Ahmed Rashid, the chaos in Afghanistan is a result directly of the forward policy of Islamabad that begins in the 1970s and then intensifies in the mid-1990s with the backing of the Taliban to the present (once more with the generals behind the neo-Taliban). Ahmed Rashid puts the onus on General Pervez Musharraf, although there are significant structural features that should just as well carry the burden of the argument. Which is what limits his analysis of Pakistan in particular, putting his hopes on “democracy” on the body of the late Benazir Bhutto, whose own feudal origins, corrupt husband and fealty to the Taliban go unmentioned (Stephen Coll, in his *Ghost Wars*, described her meetings in Washington during a visit in 1995 when she “repeatedly lied to American government officials and members of Congress about the extent of Pakistani military and financial aid to the Taliban”, all this in her attempt to “appease the Pakistani army and intelligence services”). It is neither Musharraf nor Benazir Bhutto that are personally at fault. The stumbling block for Pakistan society is in the nature of the Pakistani state, trapped as it is now in a vice between a set of powerful families, a vast military apparatus (what Ayesha Siddiqi calls Military

Inc.), and external economic and political forces. Of the latter, the central actor is the U.S., whose malevolent influence on Pakistan is vast, and is downplayed by Ahmed Rashid.

For Rashid, the problem of Pakistan is that the military has been able to pull the wool over the eyes of the Americans (willingly for Bush, unwittingly for Clinton). By showing that they are the only force capable of taking on the Islamists, they earn a blank cheque from Washington. Rashid calls this “schizophrenia”, arguing that the generals, led by Musharraf, act out this toughness for the Americans and then cosy up to the Islamists at home. The test case is the 2002 elections, which the military rigged, according to Rashid, and then delivered the border regions to the hard Right, namely the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA). The putative gains made by the MMA strengthened Islamabad’s case to Washington that Musharraf was the finger in the dike, holding back the flood of Islamism; at the same time, the gains allowed to the MMA enabled the military to deepen its own relationship with these “dogs on a leash”. America is innocent, and can be swayed. Here is the fallacy of Ahmed Rashid’s otherwise rich account.

It is a book that falls prey to the idea that the current dilemma is one governed by the wrong people in office (Bush, Musharraf) and that the right people will move things in a different direction. The right people can do nothing in the absence of popular movements that articulate a set of demands and ensure that these right people are kept accountable to those demands. Better people might be better managers of the imperial relationship between Washington and Islamabad and operate amicably but against the interests of both the Pakistani and the Afghan people.

Rashid’s book bristles when he lays out how Musharraf’s dogs broke their leash. The Pakistani Taliban has grown in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) under the leadership of a very young veteran of the recent Afghan wars, Baitullah Mahsud. Rashid points out that as the ISI has been told to desist from making any open overtures to either the Afghan Taliban (nicely ensconced in Quetta and along the border region) or the Pakistan Taliban, a clandestine service outside the ISI has grown up to do this job. From Zia-ul-Haq onward, the Pakistani military’s main cutout to the public has been the mullahs, whose own “radicalism” is enabled by Pakistan’s forward policy into Afghanistan and India through the FATA region (it is here that training camps operate openly). When Musharraf’s regime banned five extremist organisations in 2002, Munawar Hussain, leader of the Jamiat-e-Islami, poked his finger in the eye of the Pakistani state (and, in particular, the ISI): “Will Musharraf care to explain who has been patronising jihad for all those 25 years in Afghanistan and 12 years in Kashmir?” The symbolic crackdown on the extremists gave the Musharraf regime the licence to increase its authority, which was then used to squelch all organs of civil society (the judiciary, human rights organisations and on). When he eventually made a deal with the tired political leaders (Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif), it was not to transform the nature of the Pakistani state, but to preserve Military Inc. under the fig leaf of civilian rule. That Musharraf removed his uniform for a suit is an apt sign of the

shallow change.

Despite holding the power of state and of the gun, the MMA could not hold off a challenge from the Pashtun nationalist Awami National Party in the 2008 elections in the NWFP. Led by Abdul Ghaffar Khan's grandson, Asfandyar Wali Khan, the Awami party offers a vision for Pakistan at odds with that of the MMA, of the generals and of the urban elite. Rashid's book is silent about the social movements that give ballast to parties such as the Awami National Party, and to parties that are in the thick of popular struggles, such as the socialist Awami Tehreek of Sindh. When these struggles and organisations vanish from the account, all that is left is to hope for U.S. involvement to "pressure" the generals to give over the state machinery to the two major political parties.

Much the same kind of arid political landscape is on offer by Rashid for Afghanistan. He does not mention the "PDPA Generation", the young people who had been part of the Marxist regime between 1978 and 1992, some of whom were members of the two Marxist parties, some of whom left for exile after 1992 (or earlier), and many of whom remade themselves during the 1990s as activists for small, beleaguered organisations or brigands for local Taliban or mujahideen commanders. After the fall of the Taliban, a few of the latter returned to Kabul, people like Babrak Shinwari who represents the Nangahar region and people such as Nur al-Haq Olumi and Sayyed Mohammed Gulabzoi, both members of the newly created United Front of Afghanistan. There is also the vibrant Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, the brave parliamentarian Malalai Joya, and the legacy of Anahita Ratebzad, a leader in the Marxist regime who believed that the emancipation of Afghan women would come most fully from their economic independence. None of this terrain is in Rashid's book, and nor does his lunch companion want this to be part of his Afghanistan.

In February 2002, Karzai's regime banned communist parties and communist activity, preferring to cosy up to the warlords. Not for nothing, then, did Malalai Joya stand up at the jirga in 2003 and complain that the warlords are the "most anti-women people in our country" and that the "bare-footed Afghan people" will always remember their brutality in the 1990s. Karzai was not listening. One of his ears was occupied with the whispers of the warlords; the other with the demands of the Americans.
