

The Taliban and Extremism in Modern Day Afghanistan and Pakistan

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Pakistan, the United States volatile mistress in its continued "War on Terror," grew more tempestuous and unpredictable this week with the sudden and unexpected resignation of our former "ally" and Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf due to impeachment pressure initiated by the new coalition government.

Musharraf and Pakistan's legacy in combating, and at times directly aiding, the Taliban and extremism in Central Asia has been critically examined by decorated journalist and commentator Ahmed Rashid, who has followed the turbulent history of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia for nearly three decades.

His latest book *Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* represents a lifetime of research and reporting from the region with Rashid blasting all parties, even the United States, for their shared responsibility and culpability of a region teetering on the tenuous ledge between reformation and anarchy.

ALI: You've mentioned that time after time whenever the Pakistan military has tried to stop the Islamist guerillas, they've either been defeated or stymied. You've suggested this was a secret part of Musharraf's strategy: instead of cutting links with the Taliban and Al Qaeda, the ISI [Inter-Services Intelligence, Pakistan's most powerful intelligence agency] has supplied them with money and intelligence. How disconnected is the military and the government from the ISI? Does the ISI act autonomously and why does it help Taliban and Al Qaeda?

RASHID: When you have a military government, in fact thereby the army ruling the country, the military intelligence agencies don't act in isolation from the government itself, since the government itself is the military. The decision to give sanctuary to the Afghan-Taliban leadership was a state decision: it was a decision taken by Musharraf at the highest level. What degree of support to give them, how to look after them, whether to allow them to import weapons - the mechanics of it were left to the ISI. So, what we have is a state decision backed by the intelligence agency, which was the directing agency, and this is something the Americans just did not want to see. Unfortunately, the reason for that simply is that if they did accept this is going on, it would have meant a major reappraisal of the whole relationship with Musharraf. And I don't think they were prepared for that.

ALI: You are good friends with Hamid Karzai [President of Afghanistan] and he spoke to you extensively for your book. He told you that the Taliban turned against him well before they killed his father, but by that time they had "been taken over by ISI and became their proxy." If indeed they had become a proxy, what did the ISI hope to accomplish by turning the Taliban against Karzai?

RASHID: It should be remembered that the ISI backed the Taliban regime in the '90's and Pakistan benefited by that simply because the Taliban refused to allow Indians any access into Afghanistan. And for 10 years Pakistan was not under any kind of threat that India would be able to destabilize Pakistan from its Western border. The second benefit was this whole question of strategic debt; that with a friendly regime next door, Pakistan could take refuge with the army if they were attacked by India. You could carry out covert operations from Afghan soil - as they did when they trained Kashmir mujaheddin from Afghan soil for nearly 5 years, and Bin Laden helped in that.

ALI: Karzai is friendly with the United States, and he's seen as a moderate. Yet, he has not been effective in implementing democracy with political parties. You've mentioned Afghanistan tends to drift towards tribal leaders and warlords -

RASHID: Actually, I think he has become very, very angry and frustrated at the lack of Western

support. We didn't give sustained Western support until 2004. I think between 2001 and 2004 there was an enormous window of opportunity to turn around Afghanistan in a faster way and make it allowable for development to happen, which didn't because the resources weren't there. Instead, the American policy was to turn the Afghanistan leadership and its governance over to the warlords. They accepted the fact there would be a weak president at the center and instead in the countryside the warlords would keep the peace as they fought the Iraq War. This was the major strategy, because this is what Karzai inherited. He couldn't do anything about this.

Consequently, he was dumped with these warlords. He had to make peace deals with them. The second issue is that Karzai himself has become disillusioned with some of the models of democracy that have been presented to him, because they have been presented to him in a way that is not backed by aid, or support, or troops and security. I think in a sense he has gone back to a greater belief in the jirgas and shuras and his own resources rather than anything else.

ALI: You've stated the U.S. administration had this belief or ideology that democracy would sprout up and the Afghan and Iraqi people would automatically embrace it. Obviously, that has not happened. What was the major failing in the administration's ideology and vision, and how can it be rectified if at all?

RASHID: The first thing is to accept the brutal fact that this insurgency is not confined to Afghanistan; it is a regional insurgency. It embraces Pakistan, Central Asia, and even Iran. First thing, you need to have regional policy that is trying to tackle this problem at the global level rather than just confining it to Afghanistan. Secondly, you need to have an administration that needs to address and publicly admit that Pakistan is housing these Taliban shura counsels and something needs to be done about that. A mixture of policy incentives and pressures need to be applied. I think it can be made effective, but it's going to take admission by the U.S. administration that this is the case.

Thirdly, there remains the issue that there is no common strategy on the drug issue. As long as the drug issue remains outside of the bale of Western policy makers, the major source of funding and supplies for the insurgents is going to continue. I've given you three points which I think are important.

ALI: Let's tackle the last point specifically: opium, which you mention quite frequently in your book. You call opium both a savior and a facilitator. If indeed opium is so crucial to the longevity and sustenance of these extremists, then why has the U.S. government turned a blind eye to it time and time again? How can one cripple the money that comes from the Afghan opium trade?

RASHID: I think it's very simple. I mean the options have been staring the U.S. in the face and they've refused to take it. First thing, the army will not do an eradication of the poppy fields because they don't want to make enemies of the farmers. Now, I understand that - it's perfectly logical and reasonable - that goes for U.S. and for NATO. But what is absolutely unacceptable is the refusal of the U.S. military and NATO forces to stop the convoy of drugs that are passing their bases everyday, to arrest the major transporters - they clearly know who they are because they have the intelligence - and basically to interdict the trafficking which is where the big money is being made by the Taliban and Al Qaeda. And this is the refusal of carrying out interdiction, which is something the Afghan government can't do, because they don't have the helicopters, the satellites and all the bits and pieces the West does. I think it's critical that there is a united effort by the new U.S. administration to put together a coherent narcotics policy which brings U.S. and NATO on one platform to do interdiction.

ALI: We've seen the result of Pakistan's February elections: Musharraf is out [and recently resigned] and Bhutto's PPP, led by her husband Asif Ali Zardari, is in. Is this merely a cosmetic change or will this be a tangible, progressive change for Pakistani ideology and politics especially concerning their efforts in the war on terror?

RASHID: First of all, look at the background to the elections. Elections came after the main leader who could've made a huge difference in the country was assassinated: Benazir Bhutto. Secondly, Musharraf spent 18 months destroying the constitution, proclaiming Martial law, suspending the judiciary; in other words, he left behind the rubble of a legal system that was set in place for a democracy. And this new government has had to deal with it. Thirdly, Musharraf left behind a boiling insurgency in the tribal areas, and the presence

of the Taliban on Pakistan soil, which he had done very little about. Now these are the legacies that are left behind, and this is what the new civilian government has inherited.

I think it's very important to understand this. Now, rightly so, the people of Pakistan demonstrated some enormous wisdom in firstly rejecting Musharraf's party, in rejecting the fundamentalists, and in electing a secular party at the center and a secular Pushtun party at the North-West Frontier Province. This shows a maturity of the electorate: the fact they haven't been able to achieve very much so far is partly their fault, but partly due to this horrible legacy they've inherited.

ALI: The question then is we now have these four less than reliable characters: Asif Ali Zardari [current head of the PPP and convicted criminal], Nawaz Sharif [formerly exiled, two time Prime Minister], Musharraf [impeached and now resigned President], and the Pakistani military. Let's analyze these players in the post 9-11 world. Which one of these characters, if any, is the most reliable and most effective for the U.S. in rooting out terrorism in the Pakistan and Afghanistan border?

RASHID: I don't think, again, we should rely on individuals - this is precisely the mistake the Bush administration made with Musharraf. They refused to rely on institutions and a democratic government where you speak with the parliament, the prime minister, the minister, the president and so forth. If the U.S. is not capable of dealing with more than one man at a time, then I think it is very unfortunate because democracies don't run by just meeting one person, you have to lobby with all sorts of groups in a Western democracy in order to persuade them to do something. Now I think that Pakistan should be given that same status.

ALI: The criticism goes that even if you give Pakistan that status, it will still have dictators in the pose of democratically elected leaders who run the show. What to do if the military takes over? Or if Zardari takes charge? How can we discuss with any institutions in Pakistan when certain individuals become autocratic?

RASHID: I don't think any of these leaders are autocratic or control real power. They are obsessed and immersed in the moment in their inter party rivalry. Also, the fact is how to deal with this debris that Musharraf has left behind? If Benazir Bhutto had been there I think the situation would have been very different. The fact is you don't have a leader in the moment who is generally acceptable to the entire country. That leaves the running of the government extremely complicated. Now, you have to talk to at least three people in the setup in order to get any response from the civilian government, but at the same time the civilian government doesn't control foreign policy. It doesn't control policy towards India or Afghanistan. That is very much in the hands of the military. And until the civilian government is enabled to wean away foreign policy from the military, you're not going to get much progress in the militant front.

ALI: Lot of people in the West paint Pakistan with one broad, general color of extremism. Take me to the roots of "new age" Pakistani fundamentalism. Pakistan has a rich history of Sufism and Barelvi-inspired Islam, but you also see right wing Jamaati-Islam and right wing Deobandism. So, can it be traced to Wahhabism, or is it General Zia's legacy [Pakistan's assassinated, religiously conservative dictator], or is it a combination of both?

RASHID: These go back to the decisions the military took during the war against Soviets [In the 80's under General Zia's dictatorship] partly, of course, due to the U.S. supported jihad against the Soviets. Forty thousand militants from around the world came to Pakistan to fight the Soviets and to be educated in Pakistani madrassas. An enormous amount of money came from Saudi Arabia and other Arab states in order to support that. That I think is the real legacy.

The other real issue, in my opinion, was also that the Pakistani military directed much of their aid to the extremist Deobandi parties who were heavily influenced by Wahhabis [Followers of a puritanical form of Islamic theology predominant in Saudi Arabia.] At that time it was Gulbuddin Hikmetyar's [Afghan warlord] party that was favored. After that, we also see the Kashmir insurgency erupting and the support given by the military given to the Kashmir insurgency, which for fifteen years we have had this sort of running problem with. The moment the Afghan-Soviet war ended, the Kashmir insurgency started and many of these were trained in Pakistan, and later trained in Afghanistan when the Taliban regime took over.

So, it became imperative the military support the Taliban for their India policy. And even today we are

seeing the India policy dominating - or, the fear of India - dominating the Pakistan policy. The policy towards Afghanistan to a large extent is dominated by the fear of Indian presence in Afghanistan. I think it's a very overblown impression what the Indians are doing in Afghanistan. India doesn't even have troops in Afghanistan. Forty countries have troops who have more influence in Afghanistan than India.

ALI: People aren't looking at Central Asia. Explain to me the root cause of their marriage to extremism and how concerned should the rest of the world be, especially the U.S. and Pakistan, about their involvement in the global Al Qaeda campaign?

RASHID: I think Afghanistan, the regional war that is now taking place in Afghanistan -Pakistan - Asia, is the greatest threat to global security. It is part of Al Qaeda strategy to mobilize as many people around the world to support their agenda. What we've seen for example in the last 6 months are some of the plots that have been thwarted in Europe, in Spain, in Holland, in Denmark, in Germany; it poses a huge threat to global security. All these plots - these people who have been arrested in all these countries - are all traced back to FATA, where they either received training or money or instructions. The fact there is this traffic between F.A.T.A and the rest of the world is extremely worrying and I think the biggest threat to global security.