

'Militancy will not run out of steam'

Journalist Ahmed Rashid's new book *Descent Into Chaos* is an investigation into what he describes as the "failure of nation building" in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia and the threat from radical Islam.

Mr Rashid, who has written a best-selling book on the Taleban and is an authority on the region, is also a BBC News website guest columnist. He spoke to the BBC's Soutik Biswas.

You say Islamic radicalism flourishes in a vacuum and cite the cases of Central Asia, Pakistan and Afghanistan. What kind of vacuum are you talking about and why has it lasted for such a long time?

The vacuum has been created by the lack of effective state controls, the deprivation of the people and the lack of opportunities such as in education and jobs. In Afghanistan we have seen nearly continuous war since 1978 and in Pakistan the tribal areas have been wilfully neglected since 1948. In Central Asia there has been no attempt to carry out political and economic reforms since these states gained independence in 1991. These vacuums have existed for decades because local governments and the international community have refused to deal with them in a comprehensive manner.

Going by your book, some things never change in Pakistan - the US's short sighted policies which end up boosting an army which takes power at the slightest opportunity and politicians who refuse to reform and move towards building institutions. Do you see any hope and change from the new government, especially after a rather rocky start?

No genuinely elected political government in Pakistan has ever been allowed to finish a full term in office and then - if disliked by the people - be voted out of office. Democracy has failed to take root largely because the army has never allowed it to take root, but also because the politicians have never practiced democratic norms of behaviour and tried to build institutions rather than personal power bases. Historically the US has never whole-heartedly supported democratic governments in Pakistan preferring to deal with the military - which has not helped secure democracy. Once again the public had high hopes from this elected government but so far they have failed to come up to expectations.

You say that the US has consistently blundered and ended up mollicoddling dictators in Pakistan. Do you think that a new Democratic administration under Barack Obama would change that or will it be less of the same?

I am very hopeful that a new Democratic administration would be more positive to the Muslim world in general than what we have seen from President Bush. In particular I hope that they would make a better attempt at understanding the root causes of Islamic extremism and help weak states deal with them - the need for economic and social improvement, a genuine diplomatic effort to resolve outstanding issues like Palestine and Kashmir and the promotion of democracy. In Pakistan you have a situation when most of the public are supporting Obama but the establishment, including the army, is very wary of him because of the kinds of demands that he may make upon them.

Do you think the new "war against terrorism" is going to be fought in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (Fata), which you mention as the world's "Terrorism Central"? How serious is the situation?

Fata is now almost entirely controlled by the Pakistani Taleban militias who in turn provide protection to the Afghan Taleban and to al-Qaeda. Over the last few years the army has failed to protect those tribal elders and people opposed to the Taleban, as a result they have either been killed or fled. There are at present between 200,000 and 400,000 refugees from Fata scattered in other parts of Pakistan - a huge number considering there are only about three million people who live there.

Now the Pakistani Taleban are expanding their area of control in the settled areas of the North West Frontier Province and have reached Attock on the Indus river, which is really the cultural and social dividing line between Afghanistan-Central Asia and Punjab and the Indian subcontinent. This is a very dangerous development.

Across the border, in Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai has come under severe criticism for running an ineffectual administration which is weak against warlords and corruption. Do you think Afghanistan requires a new leader?

The international community should do everything possible to hold free and fair elections by the autumn of 2009 so that the Afghans can decide for themselves whether Hamid Karzai has been an effective leader or not. Any pre-cooking of the elections by the international community or interference by any of Afghanistan's neighbours could lead to a civil war situation in the country as ethnic tensions, exasperated by the Taleban insurgency and the weak government, are on the rise. If elections are not held because of the worsening security situation I fear there will be much greater chaos.

Do you see any signs of a developing Afghan nationalism of sorts, where traditionally hostile ethnic groups are ready to bury the hatchet and share power together? After a quarter of century of war, and seven years after the fall of the Taleban this should have happened, don't you think?

The key to this happening is reconstruction of the country. We have seen that the most successful programmes in Afghanistan have been national programmes, such as the rebuilding of schools and education, health clinics and the national solidarity programme that reaches into villages. Unfortunately, there have not been enough of these programmes and more importantly reconstruction of the infrastructure - that would help kick start the national economy - has been neglected. How can Afghans prosper or unite when only six to 10% have electricity and when you cannot create industry? The Afghan people have had enough of war and are looking for the opportunity to live in peace but that cannot happen without some degree of economic security.

Do you believe that Afghanistan's experiment with democracy is fundamentally flawed because of lack of political parties?

It is the lack of political parties and the refusal of President Karzai to allow elections to be run by political parties that is one of the main causes why democracy and parliament are not becoming more effective. I hope the government will see sense and hold the next elections under a political party system because without that we only continue political warlordism, the concentration of politics around individuals and the failure to build state institutions.

How do you see prospects for peace in Pakistan, Afghanistan and India in the next five years? Do you think militancy will run out of steam and peace efforts will gain momentum?

Militancy will not run out of steam until there is a more comprehensive and regional approach to dealing with the issue. We are seeing the growth of Pakistani Taleban, Central Asian Taleban and even now a small group of Iranian Taleban (Iranian Sunni Baloch opposed to the Teheran regime). Stemming this tide needs a major international diplomatic initiative which

must include securing the end of interference by neighbouring states in Afghanistan's domestic affairs, ending India and Pakistan's rivalry in Kabul which is replacing Kashmir as the main area of antagonism, talking to Iran and making it part of the international effort to help Afghanistan, trying to urge greater reforms in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan so that their young people out of despair do not travel south to join up with al-Qaeda and the Taleban.

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