

Ahmad Rashid, *Descent Into Chaos: How the War Against Islamic Extremism is Being Lost in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia*, Penguin, 2008, pp.484, Rs.495.

## **Outlook, India. Reviewed by Ayesha Jalal.**

One of the most respected journalists in Pakistan today, Ahmad Rashid made an international splash in 2001 with his book, *Taliban*. He never looked back - churning out popular books based on first hand information gleaned from a troubled region few can dare venture into. His third book in seven years has a ponderous title, portending an apocalypse. Packed with new and up-to-date information, it is actually an impassioned plea for coordinated international action to avert total chaos in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia.

A participant observer of history in the making, Rashid wants not only to be read and heard, but also heeded. He has made an invaluable contribution to the debate on why the war against Islamic extremism has been blowing up in the face of its perpetrators. His marshalling of fresh evidence is admirable and, given his knowledge of the ground situation, credible even if not all of it is instantly verifiable. The message is plain: the international community and the people of these countries have to understand what has gone wrong with the US 'war on terror' and what needs to be done to save the region and the world from the galloping cancer of extremism.

The main thesis is unremarkable: the US blundered by diverting muscle, machinery and money to Iraq instead of flushing out Al-Qaeda and rebuilding Afghanistan after 2001 to prevent a Taliban revival. What the Americans and NATO cannot fathom is that the Taliban are not Afghan or Pakistani. They are a seamless 'lumpen population', morphed into hardened fighters by refugee camps, militarized madrasas and unemployment in the borderlands of Afghanistan and Pakistan. If the focus after the initial rout of the Taliban had been on nation building, the post-9/11 history of the region might have been different. Rashid uses 'nation building' loosely, distinguishing it from state building and yet conflating the two. He is right in blaming American policy of supporting the Afghan warlords for the present woes of Hamid Karzai's government. Yet nation building, his panacea for Afghanistan, throws up an equally sordid tale of corruption and drug money among the ruling elite.

Rashid is most revealing about matters closer to home. He attributes the subversion of American objectives in Afghanistan to President Bush's unstinted support for General Pervez Musharraf who played a duplicitous game after 9/11. Like most liberal Pakistanis, the general realized that the world had zero tolerance for any country using extremism as an instrument of foreign policy. Yet elements in Pakistan's spy agency, the ISI, rejected a shift in the security doctrine, pointing to India's eager embrace of the Karzai government and contending that America and NATO would soon abandon Afghanistan. Even as Bush lauded Musharraf for delivering Arab members of Al-Qaeda to the Americans, the ISI continued supporting the Afghan Taliban through a clandestine network of ex-servicemen. These 'rogue' operatives resettled the Taliban in Pakistan's semi-autonomous federally administered tribal areas (FATA) and built a command structure for them in Baluchistan from where they organize attacks into southern Afghanistan.

The result is a hellhole for the coalition forces. Aerial bombing brings success, but alienates a war weary populace that is turning to the Taliban, flush with drug money, for security and livelihood. What has injected a new strain into the equation is the emergence of FATA as a 'multilayered terrorist cake', threatening not just Afghanistan but also Pakistan, which has been hit by a spate of

suicide bombings targeting the army, police and politicians. Fighters from Central Asia, western China, Turkey and Arab countries are in FATA, training a new generation of militants. Al-Qaeda has resurfaced in the tribal redoubts of northwestern Pakistan with a vengeance!

Is there still hope for a turnabout? Much depends on whether the PPP-led coalition government in Pakistan can wriggle out of its paralyzing deadlocks to rein in the ISI and take on the extremist challenge. Rashid does not probe the complex recesses of the Pakistani mindset, civilian or military. Nor does he dismiss the ISI's charges of Indian subversion in Baluchistan and Sindh. He instead calls for a new global compact consisting of the USA, the European Union, NATO and the UN to tackle the region's myriad problems in a holistic fashion. This includes strengthening Pakistan's newly elected government and weaning away an all-powerful army from its deadly gamble with extremism. The Afghan and Central Asian elites too have to curb their greed and concentrate on nation building. A tall order, it is one Rashid argues has to be implemented if peace is to prevail in the world. Those in doubt about the gravity of the threat ought to read his book to know why being in denial is not an option.

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