

Online Exclusive: An Interview with Ahmed Rashid

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By TOLONews.com

Ahmed Rashid, a renowned Pakistani journalist and foreign policy expert on Afghanistan and Pakistan, recently spoke with TOLONews.com to discuss some of the most pressing security and political issues facing the two countries. In this exclusive interview, Mr. Rashid responded to questions about peace talks with the Taliban, the group's Doha office, the new government in Islamabad, the security transition in Afghanistan and the country's upcoming elections.

Sam Schneider: Thank you for finding the time to do this, Mr. Rashid. We know you are a busy guy so we really do appreciate you doing this interview with us. If you don't mind, we can just jump right into the questions.

Let's start with questions related to peace talks. Recently, there has been a lot of criticism of the HPC in the manner in which its officials have handled the peace process, especially within Afghanistan. Do you think the dissatisfaction that has been expressed by much of the Afghan public as well as members of parliament is called for? What do you think the HPC and the Karzai administration could be doing better to progress the peace process?

Ahmed Rashid: Well I think there should be recognition that there is a peace lobby within the Taliban. Unfortunately, the rhetoric and the actions of President Karzai have been incredibly contradictory and self-defeating and have not allowed the HPC to play a consistent role. I think the HPC has good leadership and has a good sense of what to do, but obviously it is coming up constantly against Karzai's rejection, and at times acceptance, of what is going on in Doha. Now, having said that, I also obviously maintain that the Qataris made a huge mistake by allowing the Taliban to use their flag and symbols when it had already been agreed that they would do no such thing. But the fact is that the Qataris did not check on this just before the conference started, and naturally this annoyed Karzai and the government. But I think they overreacted by calling off talks with the Americans and the actions they took. I think the other major thing is that it's up to the President, after all it has been the president that has been the main advocate of reconciliation since 2004; it is up to the president to build a consensus in the country. And this is something he is failing to do, because he is constantly contradicting himself and contradicting what is going on, and not building a consensus in the country toward talks and a possible peace process. Talks do not mean surrender, they do not mean giving up the constitution, and they do not mean giving up on women's rights or anything like that. Talks are talks, and they are badly needed. The first issue is to have a ceasefire. And this is something that has been constantly bedeviled by the contradictions coming out of Kabul.

Sam Schneider: Okay, moving on from there, what would you say are the key points from the Kabul government's perspective and the Taliban's perspective in terms of what needs to be addressed in negotiations?

Ahmed Rashid: Well, I think the key point is a ceasefire in the war. After all, the whole point of these talks is to end the war. Nothing can happen in Afghanistan productively as long as there is violence and war between the Taliban, the Americans and the Afghan army. All the various efforts, for example, when the Americans were talking to the Taliban in 2010 and 2011, there were various confidence building measures being taken without a clear objective. I think the objective now is clear: We need a ceasefire before the NATO-American departure in 2014. And that should be the first item, and for that, I don't think it should be difficult to build a consensus inside the country. That is something the President has to do, rather than confuse the public with all these contradictory stances. It is confusing the public more, and drawing the Americans out to be the enemy, rather than the Taliban, or Pakistan as being the enemy, rather than the Taliban. It is creating extreme confusion within the minds of many Afghans, and it is alienating them from accepting a dialogue process with the Taliban.

Sam Schneider: A lot has been suggested about, and you alluded to this in your earlier answer, divisions existing within the Taliban's leadership; there being a faction more interested in reconciliation talks than another faction. Given the fact that time could be said to be on the Taliban's side, in terms of the U.S.

withdrawing and the elections being right around the corner, why would they be genuinely interested in coming to reconciliation in the near future?

Ahmed Rashid: I agree that the Taliban is very deeply divided, but so is the presidency, so are the advisors of Karzai, and the cabinet of Karzai, and the whole country is divided on this issue. So you can obviously then expect that the Taliban too would be divided. But the danger is that as long as you keep avoiding these talks, delaying them and finding problems in them, the delay is going to mean that the peace lobby I spoke about is going to be weakened, and the hardliners are going to be strengthened. Because the hardliners are going to say 'we told you so, talks with Karzai and the Americans are totally useless because they can't deliver anything.' I think the main objective of the peace lobby is really to not to have to fight a prolonged civil war after 2014. I think there is no doubt that many Taliban understand they cannot win a war, a prolonged civil war. This is a very different Afghanistan from the one that existed in 1993. The army is there, the non-Pashtuns are very strong, the international support is there, etc. etc. So I think the peace lobby understands they do not want an endless civil war in Afghanistan, which is what most Afghans want also; they want an end to the war and an end to the fighting. And secondly, I think the more intelligent Taliban also understand that they are, in their present shape and form, unacceptable to most Afghans and unacceptable to the entire international community. So, it would be much more sensible for them to find a niche for themselves in some kind of deal with the present government and be accommodated in it rather than try to capture Afghanistan or conquer Afghanistan once again, which would leave them completely isolated from the people and from the world.

Sam Schneider: Let's move on to, and you already spoke about this a little bit, the Qatar office and the controversy that surrounded that. Why would you say President Karzai and officials in the administration were so quick to blame the U.S. for what happened there?

Ahmed Rashid: Because I think there are very high level officials who are advisors to Karzai that do want talks, do not support the talks and are looking for any opportunity to sabotage them. And that is the problem. Karzai has not been able to have people around him that all support the talks and can deal with success and failure in the talks. And that makes the whole position of the HPC incredibly difficult. How can the HPC operate in a sustained manner for reconciliation when there are senior members of the cabinet that are trying to sabotage the peace talks as much as they can?

Sam Schneider: One last question on Qatar. Reportedly now the Taliban's office is empty, do you think that negotiations, when they are to begin once again, if they are to begin once again, will happen there? If not, where might they be held instead?

Ahmed Rashid: Well, you know, I think this is all speculation at the moment. I hope that the process will be resumed in Doha, that's where the whole set-up has been for the last 18 months. That's where the earlier talks took place. The Qataris have bungled very badly the opening of these talks without a doubt, but I think their heart is in the right place. They are a neutral gulf state; other gulf states are controversial in one way or another to the Afghans. And Qatar is prepared to spend a lot of money in hosting the Taliban and hosting these talks, etc. So it makes sense to start them off in Qatar. I don't see Karzai, the government or the Taliban taking on another country where these talks could be held, which they would consider as neutral as Qatar has been.

Sam Schneider: Okay, thank you. Shifting focus now to Pakistan, with regard to the new government in Islamabad, what would you say has changed, if anything, in light of it coming to power, when it comes to the approach to insurgency in Pakistan and Afghanistan?

Ahmed Rashid: Well I think that is a very important question. And that is exactly the question being addressed by the government right now. I think Nawaz Sharif came in with the expectation that all he needed to do was fix the economy, and get energy and electricity back on line. Remember, this government has only been in power for five weeks, within the first two weeks he himself admits he spent 90% of the time on the economy and energy. But then, he learned very quickly, that it is impossible to fix the economy or energy without dealing with the internal insurgencies and terrorism that are going on in Pakistan. The past government's failure to deal with this has created this complete vacuum in which foreigners are not willing to come into Pakistan and invest, buy goods or anything else. Now, he has linked a solution, or a plan to deal with terrorism and the insurgency, and he's formulating a national security strategy, which is the first time Pakistan will be hopefully making such a strategy. In other words, a strategy that enlists the politicians, the army, the bureaucracy, the intelligence, civil society and move toward ending the insurgency in the tribal areas by the Pakistani Taliban, the insurgency in Baluchistan and the extreme levels of violence and insurgency in Karachi. So we have a very dire problem. He will be making a national security strategy, and I think he will also be

making, for the first time, a national security council that will be advising the government on how to combat extremism. Now, alongside that, I think there is also a very sharp awareness that the economy cannot be fixed and terrorism cannot be fixed until Pakistan's foreign policy is changed. And that means improving relations with India and improving relations with Afghanistan. And obviously, improving relations with Afghanistan is going to imply that Pakistan does much more to urge the Taliban to the negotiating table, and urge the Taliban to get back to Doha and resume these talks. It's only been five weeks so far, but I think a lot is going to be happening here in the next couple of months. And that is going to include a civilian push, with the military, and intelligence, to get the Taliban back to Doha.

Sam Schneider: Where do you see the U.S. counterinsurgency operations in Pakistan going, given the 2014 deadline and the potential of a "zero option" being taken? Will the new government in Islamabad be more or less accommodating to them, with particular focus on drone operations?

Ahmed Rashid: There is the speculation that the Americans have offered the Pakistanis an end to the drone campaign once their troops leave Afghanistan in 2014. But of course, this is going to depend also on how successful the Pakistan military and government is in containing the Taliban insurgency in the tribal areas. And also, of course, it's going to depend on what kind of residue force the Americans are going to leave behind. The assumption is that the residue force is going to be very small, and it is not going to have the capacity or the will to continue drone attacks on Pakistan. Which means the Pakistanis will need to get their act together and do more to kill and capture some of the leading Taliban militants who refuse to enter into any sort of dialogue with Pakistan and continue to help the hard-line Taliban in Afghanistan.

Sam Schneider: A little over a week ago, some Afghan officials claimed that Pakistani diplomats approached them with more or less a partition plan, a compromise between the Kabul government and the Taliban that involved land concessions. Pakistani officials responded by outright denying any such proposal had been made. What's the real story and what is your take on that series of events?

Ahmed Rashid: Well I don't know what the real story is, but I think it would be extremely stupid and naïve of any Pakistani officials to try to paint a future framework for Afghanistan. That is the job for the Afghans. The new foreign minister, Sartaj Aziz, has said that repeatedly. Now I do know that the former government and the former foreign minister at that time, Hina Rabbani Khar, was very aggressive toward the Afghan government, and in my opinion, did say some very stupid things that should never have been said by a Pakistani foreign minister. I do not think this current government is following along those lines at all, and I do think this present government is much more sensitive to and aware of Afghan sovereignty and the Afghans' need to sort out their own political problems, rather than ask for or listen to Pakistani advice. Remember the real upset with Pakistan by President Karzai, and perfectly justifiable, was when in January at the meeting in Checkers outside London with David Cameron when the Pakistani foreign minister made some outrageous comments that quite rightly deeply annoyed President Karzai. And he responded with a tirade against Pakistan. I do not think that is really genuine, I don't think that has been followed by this government. I do think President Karzai should give this government a chance. It is the first time we are undertaking a national security strategy and the creation of a national security council, and all of these are incredibly important. They are important also to bring the military, which has been conducting foreign policy, and conducting all the counterinsurgency operations with very little civilian input, onto the same page as the civilians. As you know given Pakistan's history of military role and military dominance in foreign policy, this is incredibly important.

Sam Schneider: Moving on to the security transition in Afghanistan, when the Qatar office negotiations fell apart, one of the steps Karzai took was to freeze Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) talks with the U.S. He has now tied the fate of the BSA with that of the peace process - he has said that he will not begin the talks again until the Taliban agrees to meet with the HPC. Why do you think he chose to do this? Some have suggested that he is delaying the BSA in order to force the U.S. to acquiesce to some of his self-interested demands, a line coming out of the Afghan parliament primarily. What do you make of that?

Ahmed Rashid: I think he misunderstands the situation in the U.S. at the moment. There is an enormous desire from Congress and from the American people to pull out completely from Afghanistan, and even to stop the money flowing. I think the mood in the U.S. is not understood by the Karzai government. It presumes that the talk of the "zero option" is some kind of bluffing by President Obama - I can assure you it is not bluffing. I have been with congressmen, I have been with the administration, and I have been with media and public opinion. There are very few people in America right now that want to prolong the U.S. presence in Afghanistan as the strategic talks would imply. So I think Karzai should be far more accommodating, because I do think he is going to need American forces, he does want American forces. But he can't take this dialogue to the very last point

and presume that the Americans will always come around and accept what he wants. People are saying inside the administration 'my god, if we are facing these problems with Karzai now, even before the agreement is signed, how are we going to spend the next five years operating in Afghanistan with Karzai, with a much smaller force doing training and all the other stuff; how are we going to work with Karzai when he is going to be fighting at every step of the way?' So I think there is enormous frustration in the U.S., and Karzai needs an American presence, he needs a NATO presence. And he knows he wants it, he's not trying to do what happened in Iraq when the Americans pulled out. He needs to draw a line between the Doha process and talks with the Taliban and his alliance with the U.S. After all, it is an alliance with the U.S. that is going to strengthen his hand in talks with the Taliban. He needs to carry both things through on two separate tracks.

Let me say one more thing, I think the most important step for Afghanistan and the intellectual community in the coming months is not necessarily reconciliation nor is it the transition, it is the election, the elections scheduled for April. Now, even on that front, there is an increasing loss of confidence amongst many Afghans - especially the opposition - that all the preparation for the elections, the legal issues that have to be resolved, the appointments that have to be made for the various commission and judiciary are all going to be complete by that time. I think it is absolutely essential for President Karzai not to delay the elections, and quickly pass and find the preparatory documents and organizations that are needed to carry out the elections. A failure in the elections would be far more damaging to the country, and really polarize the country, even to the extent of causing a new civil war - between north and south or Pashtun and non-Pashtun, etc. - and it would be extremely dangerous to play around with the election timing.

Sam Schneider: Well thank you for your time, Mr. Rashid.

Ahmed Rashid: Thank you, all the best.