

## Ahmed Rashid's new books reveals a Pakistan crippled by poor leadership, says Duncan Gardham

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As Britain desperately tries to rescue some pride from its imminent withdrawal from Afghanistan, the best-case scenario may be that we leave behind a less stable and more corrupt version of Pakistan. The vision of that country painted by Ahmed Rashid, one of the leading analysts of the "Af-Pak" relationship, is not an encouraging one. "Pakistan is now considered the most fragile place in the world... It is the most unstable country and the most vulnerable to terrorist violence, political change or economic collapse," he writes in his latest book, *Pakistan on the Brink*.

While it is not yet a failed state, Rashid admits that its multiple long-term and short-term problems seem "insurmountable by the present military and civilian leadership".

Among the myriad problems are the corrupt and rundown bureaucracy, judiciary and police force and an elite that "lacks all sense of responsibility towards the public, refuses to pay taxes and is immeasurably corrupt". There is no drinking water for a third of the population, no electricity for up to 16 hours a day and half the school-age children do not go to school, meaning "young men face a future of little promise and are ready to sign on to jihad".

The judiciary is a "broken instrument incapable of handing down judgments to the real criminals" and retired intelligence officers spread conspiracy theories and blame America on a plethora of high-octane chat shows.

Meanwhile, the West cannot afford to continue the fight in Afghanistan and the question is, in the words of one anonymous Western ambassador, "will there be an Afghan army and civil service to take over when we leave, or will we just switch off the lights?"

Even if you're optimistic the Afghan state will still be a "basket case" dependent on receiving more than \$8 billion (£5 bn) in aid each year, Rashid points out.

Pakistan is not much better, having sought bail-outs from the IMF 11 times since 1988 and completed just one of their programmes (under General Pervez Musharraf in 2001) and remaining dependent on \$4.8 billion (£3 bn) in foreign assistance. Debt servicing and defence take up 60 per cent of the Pakistani budget and growth was just 2.6 per cent last year, compared with around 7 per cent next door in India.

*Pakistan on the Brink* follows on from where *Descent into Chaos* (2008) - on David Cameron's summer reading list for his shadow cabinet - left off. It provides a much-needed update on what has happened in Afghanistan and Pakistan over the past four years, particularly the raid that killed Osama bin Laden, the rapid breakdown of the US relationship with Pakistan and attempts to make peace with the Taliban.

Rashid is as critical of President Barack Obama's approach to Afghanistan as he was of President George W Bush in his last book. It was clear that the US gambled on Hamid Karzai losing the 2009 presidential elections and by the time he won, the relationship had disintegrated almost beyond repair.

"Handling a wary president preoccupied with keeping his own head requires a personal touch," Rashid says of his old friend, before adding that "Karzai was his own worst enemy" who failed to accept that corruption undermined his legitimacy.

The problem is that the leadership in Pakistan is no better. "For too long the military and the political parties have neglected their one single task, which is to make life better for their people," he concludes.

Rashid's thesis is that the military is in the driving seat, deciding policy, in both Pakistan and Afghanistan, to the detriment of both nations. That ignores the theory that the military is, in the words of one analyst, "the

only institution that really works in Pakistan”, as well as Nato’s Herculean efforts in Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, if Pakistan follows its present chosen path - a “paranoid insecure” state which uses “extremists and diplomatic blackmail” - it will, he warns, “lose everything in Afghanistan”.

This excellent book summarises the challenges faced by both countries - although the solutions are difficult to see. A former Daily Telegraph correspondent in Pakistan, Rashid has an eye for the big picture as well as a journalist’s nose for detail.

Pakistan has enormous latent goodwill and expertise in a generation of young Britons with their roots in Pakistan. Like their neighbours across the Khyber Pass, they have spectacular natural beauty, plentiful natural resources, a strategic position for trade, an evocative history and a people with eyes that sparkle with untapped potential - if only their leaders had more vision.