

Ahmed Rashid speaks at FC College Lahore on Afghanistan

Friday, November 6, 2013

Ahmed Rashid.

On November 6, 2013 the Department of History, Forman Christian College, invited distinguished journalist and author, Ahmed Rashid on the topic 'Afghanistan 2014: The Endgame?' In a very informative talk Mr Rashid categorised four transitions which are to take place in and after 2014 in Afghanistan. First, the political transition would solely hinge upon the presidential elections in April 2014. If they are rigged as in 2009, Rashid exclaimed, then the situation will be disastrous. The United States is still ignoring the post-election scenario, he noted. Secondly, Mr Rashid said that the stakeholders are ignoring the economic situation of the country. 'Earlier, Afghanistan was self-sufficient in food, now the country imports a lot of its rations and there is no industry to speak of,' the author of Taliban, remarked. Who will continue to give Afghanistan aid post 2014 is what the real problem is. 'I do not foresee either Washington, or London, or even the European capitals supporting Afghanistan more than a year or two,' he remarked. Ahmed Rashid's third argument was that the Afghan Taliban are ready for talks and that there should be some compromise with them.

Ahmed Rashid stated that these Taliban have had governance experience for six years, but they know that they were then a failure then and that they will again fail. Therefore instead of toppling the government in Kabul, they will in fact agree to work with it. Fourthly, there has been no regional effort to stop interference in Afghan affairs post 2014. He said that a lot of the chaos in the 1990's was caused by the interference of several countries in Afghanistan and that such interference again will only exasperate the situation. Therefore pre-US withdrawal there needs to be a concerted effort to prevent neighbouring countries and other powers from interfering in Afghanistan.

Continuing further, Ahmed Rashid pointed out that there is a split in the US administration on its Afghan policy, something which was clear when the Afghan Taliban held a US soldier and wanted their commanders to be released in return. The staunch refusal of the Department of Defence and the negotiating attitude of the State Department clearly pointed out to a different attitude towards the issue. This ambivalent attitude will also mean that post 2014 there will be no surety of US support to either the Afghan National Army, which depends heavily on the US, and the Afghan government itself, which funds over 80% of its budget on aid money. The loyalty of the Afghan army and its heavily Tajik and Uzbek officer cadre and fewer Pashtun officers are also causes of concern.

Commenting on the differences between the Afghan and Pakistan Taliban Mr Ahmed Rashid said that where the Afghan Taliban are mainly focused on getting the US out of their country, the aim of the Pakistani Taliban is to disestablish the country and to fight a global jihad. The Pakistani Taliban also have clear links with Al Qaeda and other terrorist outfits, which the Afghans do not have. Most importantly, while the Afghan Taliban are ready to talk, the Pakistani Taliban are not. The Pakistan government is currently talking from a position of weakness and therefore the Pakistani Taliban are in no mood of compromise.

Speaking on the problems is mired in Mr Rashid said, 'Rather than believing in any conspiracy theories, we need to accept that we are suffering the problems we have created ourselves. Only then we will begin to solve our issues.' He said that the PPP government absolved all responsibly of the defense policy to the military, and the current government also seems unsure what to do. Pakistan needs to have a clear strategy which includes the threat of force, dialogue, economic initiatives, etc, if we have to get out of this quagmire. No half-hearted measures, or just an emphasis on dialogue, can work. Only a well thought out and clear strategy led by the government can work.