

Pakistan's conspiracy theories stifle debate

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Guest columnist Ahmed Rashid on how the real problems facing Pakistan are being sidelined by a surge of conspiracy theories

By Ahmed Rashid

Switch on any of the dozens of satellite news channels now available in Pakistan.

You will be bombarded with talk show hosts who are mostly obsessed with demonizing the elected government, trying to convince viewers of global conspiracies against Pakistan led by India and the United States or insisting that the recent campaign of suicide bomb blasts around the country is being orchestrated by foreigners rather than local militants.

Viewers may well ask where is the passionate debate about the real issues that people face - the crumbling economy, joblessness, the rising cost of living, crime and the lack of investment in health and education or settling the long-running insurgency in Balochistan province.

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The answer is nowhere.

One notable channel which also owns newspapers has taken it upon itself to topple the elected government and appears to hardly ever air democratic views.

Another insists that it will never air anything that is sympathetic to India, while all of them bring on pundits - often retired hard line diplomats, bureaucrats or retired Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) officers who sport Taliban-style beards and give viewers loud, angry crash courses in anti-Westernism and anti-Indianism, thereby reinforcing views already held by many.

Collapse of Confidence

Pakistan is going through a multi-dimensional series of crises and a collapse of public confidence in the state.

Suicide bombers strike almost daily and the economic meltdown just seem to get worse.

But this is rarely apparent in the media, bar a handful of liberal commentators who try and give a more balanced and intellectual understanding by pulling all the problems together.

The explosion in TV channels in Urdu, English and regional languages has bought to the fore large numbers of largely untrained, semi-educated and unworldly TV talk show hosts and journalists who deem it necessary to win viewership at a time of an acute advertising crunch, by being more outrageous and sensational than the next channel.

On any given issue the public barely learns anything new nor is it presented with all sides of the argument.

Every talk show host seems to have his own agenda and their guests reflect that agenda rather than offer alternative policies.

Recently one senior retired army officer claimed that Hakimullah Mehsud - the leader of the Pakistani Taliban which is fighting the army in South Waziristan and has killed hundreds in daily suicide bombings in the past five

weeks - has been whisked to safety in a US helicopter to the American-run Bagram airbase in Afghanistan.

In other words the Pakistani Taliban are American stooges, even as the same pundits admit that US-fired drone missiles are targeting the Pakistani Taliban in Waziristan.

These are just the kind of blatantly contradictory and nut-case conspiracy theories that get enormous traction on TV channels and in the media - especially when voiced by such senior former officials.

The explosion in civil society and pro-democracy movements that brought the former military regime of President Pervez Musharraf to its knees over two years has become divided, dissipated and confused about its aims and intentions.

Even when such activists do appear on TV their voices are drowned out by the conspiracy theorists who insist that every one of Pakistan's ills are there because of interference by the US, India, Israel and Afghanistan.

The army has not helped by constantly insisting that the vicious Pakistani Taliban campaign to topple the state and install an Islamic emirate is not a local campaign waged by the dozens of extremist groups, some of whom were trained by the military in the 1990s, but the result of foreign conspiracies.

Economic Crisis

Such statements by the military hardly do justice to the hundreds of young soldiers who are laying down their lives to fight the Taliban extremists.

Nor has the elected government of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) tried to alter the balance, as it is mired in ineffective governance and widespread corruption while failing to tackle the economic recession that is admittedly partly beyond its control.

Moreover the PPP has no talking pundits, sympathetic talk show hosts or a half decent media management campaign that can attempt to refute the lies and innuendo that much of the media is now spewing out.

At present the principle obsession is when and how President Asif Ali Zardari will be replaced or sacked, although there is no apparent constitutional course available to get rid of him except for a military coup, which is unlikely.

The campaign waged by some politicians and parts of the media - with underlying pressure from the army - is all about trying to build public opinion to make Mr Zardari's tenure untenable.

Nobody discusses the failure of the education system that is now turning out hundreds of suicide bombers, rather than doctors and engineers.

Or the collapsing and corrupt national health system that forces the poorest to seek expensive private medical treatment, or the explosion in crime or suicides by failed farmers and workers who have lost their jobs.

Pakistan cannot tackle its real problems unless the country's leaders - military and civilian - first admit that much of the present crisis is a result of long-standing mistakes, the lack of democracy, the failure to strengthen civic institutions and the lack of investment in public services like education, even as there continues to be a massive investment in nuclear weapons and the military.

Pakistan's crisis must be first acknowledged by officialdom and the media before solutions can be found.

The alternative is a continuation of the present paralysis where people are left confused, demoralized and angry.

Story from BBC NEWS.