

## Ten years of meltdown in Pakistan

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After a decade scarred by escalating militancy, deadly waves of suicide bombings and truculent relations with the West, Ahmed Rashid considers the devastating impact that the 9/11 attacks in the US had on Pakistan.

Since 2001, the Pakistani state has turned into a far bigger crisis for its people, the region and the international community than anyone could have imagined. After spending the past 10 years ostensibly fighting the "war on terror" as partners of the United States, Pakistan now finds itself on a war footing with the Americans.

This follows accusations by top US officials that Pakistan's intelligence agency, the ISI, is aiding the Afghan extremist Jalaluddin Haqqani network, which is attacking US forces in Afghanistan.

Pakistanis are now fearing some kind of unilateral US action. It could take the shape of increased bombing by drone missiles, which have already killed thousands of people - many of them militants, but also Pakistani civilians. The Pakistan army is now on a high state of combat alert ready to meet any threat. What on Earth happened to bring this crisis about ?

Mired in scandal

There is no doubt that Pakistan has suffered enormously from being a partner of the US war in Afghanistan. The government response to the devastating floods in Sindh province has been criticised.

The economy has been in a state of meltdown for months because of the violence, a lack of investment, and an energy crisis, while inflation is at an all-time high. Now there is large-scale capital flight as wealthy Pakistanis relocate outside the country.

Although Pakistan has received \$20.5bn (£12.8bn) from the US in aid since 2001, about 70% of that has gone to the military. Spending on education and health has declined dramatically. Since it came into power in 2008, the Pakistan People's Party government has failed to offer good governance and is mired in corruption scandals.

Ethnic unrest has increased immeasurably with a separatist insurgency in Balochistan and the growth of the Pakistani Taliban, which has led to the state in effect losing control of between 10% and 15% of the country's territory.

Many Pakistanis now acknowledge that there has been a national failure of both the civilian and military elite to give the country leadership. The elite lacks all sense of responsibility towards the public, refuses to pay taxes or provide adequate services to the people and is viewed as corrupt.

There is no civilian control over the armed forces and in fact the recent crisis with the US has made the army enormously powerful once again in relation to the government and the politicians.

It was indicative that President Asif Ali Zardari disappeared from the political scene as the crisis with the US worsened and has spent much time abroad, while decisions were made not by the civilian cabinet or the defence committee of the cabinet but by the army's powerful Corps Commanders.

The military dictates the country's foreign policy especially towards India, Afghanistan and the US, consumes more than 30% of the national budget and runs several intelligence services that are unaccountable to parliament or the courts.

The military and political elite's use of Islamic extremists to pursue foreign policy goals and agendas for several decades in India and Afghanistan has now backfired and created an internal extremist movement - the Pakistani Taliban which has brutally targeted the armed forces and civilians.

Sectarian attacks against Pakistan's minorities have increased sharply.

There has been little change in this scenario and the military's thinking since the 1950s, although the Cold War has ended, globalisation has come and gone, and democratic movements are bursting out all over the Muslim world.

One of the first demands of the participants of the Arab Spring is democratic control over their armed forces and greater accountability from the intelligence services - something that Pakistan is sorely lacking.

On the other hand, the political parties have also failed to offer a viable alternative. The parties now preside over a wave of intolerance by extremists against minority non-Muslim and Muslim groups and refuse to take them on. The elite refuse to pay taxes or carry out meaningful economic reforms.

Their failure to deal with the social and political meltdown in Karachi has left hundreds of people dead and tortured by political and criminal mafias.

A litany of natural disasters including devastating floods in 2010 and again in 2011 and an epidemic of dengue fever in Punjab were unavoidable, but governmental concern and aid delivery has been totally inadequate.

Afghan solution

Pakistanis have begun to fear the worst - international isolation, internal anarchy, the danger of civil war, a possible coup by Islamic militants. All of these scenarios were implausible a few years ago but are now well in the realm of possibilities.

Change can only start coming about when the war in Afghanistan ends. For that, Pakistan needs to stop giving sanctuary to the Taliban and offer to broker immediate talks between the insurgents and the Kabul regime and the Americans. That must be coupled with a deadline for the Afghan Taliban to leave Pakistan. The Pakistani Taliban wield immense power in parts of the country

There is the hope that this government will survive until the next elections so that for the first time in its history, Pakistan can see a change of regime through democratic means. However, if Pakistan is to be lumbered with the same political leadership as today, then change and progress will be impossible to achieve.

Before the elections, both President Zardari and opposition leader Nawaz Sharif should offer that they will not stand to lead the country in the next elections and will encourage a new leadership to emerge through democratic elections held in their respective parties.

Pakistan is on the edge of a precipice and one faulty step - either by the Americans or the Pakistan army - could plunge an already beleaguered state into meltdown.

The country needs political solutions to its problems but at the same it has to galvanise all its resources to fight the scourge of domestic militant extremism, and that means helping peace in Afghanistan so the Afghan Taliban can leave the country.

*Ahmed Rashid's book, Taliban, was updated and reissued recently on the 10th anniversary of its publication. His latest book is Descent into Chaos - The US and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia.*