

## Interview With Ahmed Rashid

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A well-known author and journalist on Afghan affairs, Ahmed Rashid, told IRIN on Thursday he was optimistic that the current alignment of international interest could ultimately lead to peace in Afghanistan. Despite vested interests re-emerging among Afghanistan's neighbours, he maintained that, exhausted by endless war, and with disruptions to the previous war economy, Afghan factions were ready to turn weapons in for a stake in the country's economic development.

Although the UN could have a role in facilitating a broad-based Afghan government, he expected its main priorities to be providing humanitarian and development aid and helping to revive civil society.

Rashid said he also expected women would have a role in a future Afghan government. However, once the fighting ended, he warned that any premature attempts by the international community to hold warlords accountable for war crimes risked stalling progress towards future Afghan consensus.

**QUESTION:** From your perspective, what progress has been made to date with [UN Special Representative of the Secretary General Lakhdar] Brahimi's political campaign?

**ANSWER:** There has been a lot of confusion because of some comments by American and British officials. It's not possible for the UN to get involved in the war. Some of the comments by US Secretary of State Colin Powell, and even British Prime Minister Tony Blair, seem to imply that the UN has to get involved as part of the multinational peacekeeping force during the war.

I think one thing we should be very clear about is that the UN has no desire to get involved while the fighting is on. A major part of Afghanistan has to be freed from Taliban control before any kind of UN plan comes into being. I think Ambassador Brahimi has been very clear about this both publicly and privately, and I think Kofi Annan also.

The second part of the political process is that there are two problems. One is the internal problem of building an Afghan consensus, and the second part of the problem is building consensus among [Afghanistan's] neighbours, which, of course, is the oldest problem that the UN has faced for the last 12 years.

There was a hope this time of an agreement [as] to the nature of the government. Everyone is saying that there should not be an imposed government. There was hope that the attitude of the

neighbours had changed and [that] the running of proxies inside Afghanistan would diminish.

But what we have seen over the last two weeks, of course, is that the neighbours have been at loggerheads. So everyone is making their demands. Pakistan is saying we want a 60 percent Pashtun government. Iranians are saying 30 percent of the government has to be our nominees.

[Russian President Vladimir] Putin has signed a deal with [ousted Afghan President Borhanoddin] Rabbani, who actually controls very little and does not really represents the United Front in many ways. Many in the United Front are opposed to Rabbani. So the outer-range problem, the problem of achieving a consensus amongst the countries of the outer range [neighbours] has become again very contentious.

Q: So in your view there hasn't been an alignment between the neighbours' views and players outside the region since 11 September?

A: Well, I think there was a period when there was an alignment, but the moment the idea that the Taliban might quickly fall came up, then every country started raising their own demands. This was expected, but some countries have raised it in a very strong manner, and that has resulted in other countries replying in a very strong manner. Unfortunately, we are back to this issue of the early 1990s of percentages, which I find appalling. No Afghan will raise [the issue of] a percentage.

Of every Afghan peace group that Ambassador Brahimi has spoken to, not one Afghan spoke about percentages. Outside players talk about percentages. It's ruinous, because it's a divisive issue that divides Afghan society. It does not help in the forming of consensus within Afghan society. If somebody is saying that I am 60 percent and you are 30 percent, it's already creating benchmarks for any kind of internal Afghan consensus, which is ruinous.

Q: Haven't Afghans always said that, despite their internal fighting, they want to see Afghanistan united?

A: Absolutely. That's essential, and I think no Afghan has ever demanded the partition of the country. We should hail Afghans for being more sophisticated than the Yugoslavs or the Somalis or the Ethiopians or the Eritreans, who have divided their countries and then fought [over it] even after the division.

Here you have a nation where literacy is 10 percent, and you have a nation which is in a tribal or clan mode of society, which has no desire to fracture. Even the most extremist Pashtun radical leaders in the past, people like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, nobody has ever demanded a separate state.

Q: You mentioned Pakistan's role. Has there been a shift in Pakistan's position [on Afghan governance]? A few weeks ago it spoke of including Taliban moderates, now there is less emphasis on that. What's its position now in your view?

A: First of all there has been a radical U-turn by Pakistan, [by] dumping the Taliban and joining the Western alliance. Whether that shift has penetrated all the way down in intelligence agencies and other mechanisms of government that deal with Afghanistan is still a bit unclear.

But I think some of President Musharraf's comments have been very provocative. His complete dismissal of the Northern Alliance, for example. Whether we like them or not, the Northern Alliance is going to capture northern Afghanistan at some stage, and they will be ruling half the country. They may be divided, they may be fractious, but they will be ruling half the country.

Another point about Musharraf: he was the first person to raise the issue of percentages. He first talked [about] pro-Pakistan Pashtuns representing 60 percent of the country, and that they have to be represented in the government. It was immediately after this that other countries started talking about percentages.

I do not think that Pakistan should raise this issue. It should talk about a broad-based government. The issue of who is represented in that government should be left to the Afghans. Pakistan should not be dictating. Once you raise this issue of percentages, you get into these rebuttals and confrontations with other states.

The third thing is that it seems that so far President Musharraf has associated Pashtuns with the Taliban. He has talked about Pashtuns being Taliban defectors, but I think there is a huge swathe of Pashtuns who are consensus-minded, democracy-minded and who are anti-Taliban. In my opinion we haven't heard their voices yet because of the kind of control, the oppression, that has been conducted in the south [of Afghanistan].

The whole effort of the former king [Mohammad Zahir Shah] or Pir [Sayed Ahmad] Gailani [leader of the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan] is to try and get these voices heard. President Musharraf should realise that there is a democratic bloc of Pashtuns who want the reconstitution of Afghanistan, with a proper constitution, back to what it was. He is not pointing that out at all. Yes, I agree there has to be some Taliban elements. What's dangerous is not the politics of the Taliban - that has to be represented - it's the culture of the Taliban.

The Taliban has created a culture in parts of southern Afghanistan that's very extremist. We cannot do away with that culture by fiat or by decree. We have to understand the psychological processes or brainwashing of many young men that has taken place, and we have to allow that culture to slowly evaporate with education, reconstruction and whatever the peace process is going to entail.

But for the time being they have to understand that this culture has to be represented. So the Taliban should be included in the future post-Taliban [structure], but I would see the bulk of the Pashtuns being represented by all the other political factions who are basically anti-Taliban. Some may be pro-king, but they basically believe in a constitutional government.

Q: These were the groups that met in Peshawar, in a Jirgah [tribal leaders'] meeting about a week and a half ago. Of course Abdul Haq was involved in that; what are the implications of his killing [by the Taliban], is that a setback?

A: Abdul Haq was a loyalist to the Loya Jirgah [supreme national tribal assembly] process, and he had gone [into Afghanistan] in to raise an anti-Taliban rebellion. He was not just a Pashtun commander, but a national figure. He played a major role in the 1980s and in the early 1990s. Unfortunately, there are not many Pashtun commanders who became national figures. Other commanders have gone in from Quetta and Peshawar that may not be as big figures as Abdul Haq, but they are certainly playing a role in galvanizing anti-Taliban opposition.

Q: It is a very fluid time. What is your view on what political scenarios could unfold over the next six months?

A: I am very depressed by the American war strategy. I think it's going seriously wrong. I think what is seriously lacking is a very strong political component, which is why you precisely need the US clout right now, and pressure and policy, to help the Afghans come together to speed up the process of anti-Taliban consensus among the Afghans. You need pressure and policy to make sure the regional countries don't try and reimpose their own narrow interests over the Afghans.

Of course, the military [campaign] has become very controversial, and they are bombing, it seems to me, empty buildings in the cities in which there is a lot of civilian damage. That is the basic conundrum: you want the cities to fall, but you are not prepared to use the Northern Alliance to do it, and you are not prepared to use your own ground troops to do it, but you want the cities to fall. How do you bring it together? These are contradictory aims, and you have not resolved this basic contradiction.

Similarly with Kabul. You want Kabul to fall, you want the Taliban ousted from Kabul, and you are not prepared to use the Northern Alliance to do it, and you are not using your own troops. So far there is no southern Pashtun force which could help the Northern Alliance to take Kabul.

Q: Do you see the military situation remaining static over the winter?

A: Yes, I think this is a very long campaign. I presume there will be an American political strategy, but how long it takes to nurture I don't know.

Q: What do you know about the UN's role in peace building. Is that in a draft phase?

A: Broadly speaking, the first aim of the UN will be to try and achieve some kind of consensus between the regional countries, particularly Iran and Pakistan. I think it's very significant that Mr Brahimi's first trip was to Tehran and Islamabad. I think this shows and demonstrates the importance he puts on the need for consensus between the neighbours.

The second phase is for UN efforts to help rebuild consensus between the Afghans themselves. I don't see, in the first phase, the UN supporting any specific Afghan proposal, whether that's Gailani or Mohammad Zahir Shah. It will have a very broad approach to come together as quickly as possible and to achieve a consensus.

Vitaly, because of the UN role in humanitarian engagements, [the organisation] has enormous credibility in the districts, in the provinces and among society. It has [an] enormous presence because of all the years of humanitarian work that the UN has carried out. The third track that the UN will be pursuing is to build organisations of civil society once the agencies can go inside Afghanistan. The first two approaches are top-down, in which you have a consensus among the leadership at the top. The third approach will be a bottom-up approach.

Hopefully the UN will use the experience, credibility, knowledge, facts and data that it has to build local councils or shuras among civil society, and to create local representation among civil society. I think this is the task that the UN must undertake, and nobody else is in a position to undertake it. This local representation will then feed into the top-down process. This is broadly at the moment how I see what the UN role would be.

Q: Presumably such a civil society structure will also include a large number of women?

A: Of course, and it's very significant that Mr Brahimi has been meeting women. Half of his meetings have been with women, so that's a very strong message that he is sending and the UN is sending as a whole.

Every statement, every comment from Kofi Annan raises the role of women. I think every moderate Afghan or every Afghan who is interested in creating a new government, of any ethnic group, have been informing the UN that women must be included.

Q: Are you saying that we can expect to see women in future Afghan governance?

A: I think many of the Afghans who met Ambassador Brahimi have demanded that if there is a Loya Jirgah, women need to have a proportion of seats. If there are councils, women have to have seats in the councils, even in cabinets. And these proposals came from men.

Q: In terms of establishing peace, some people have said that before any stability returns to Afghanistan, war crimes need to be addressed? What is your view on this?

A: My position is very clear. There is nobody in Afghanistan who does not have blood on their hands. This has been a war of 23 years. There are maybe a handful of individuals who you can count as clean. If this issue of war crimes is to be evaluated from day one, it will be virtually impossible to form any kind of government or consensus amongst Afghan leaders, or the faction chiefs. What I urged human rights organisations to consider is that they should protect human rights for all Afghans in the future.

But I am not denying the fact that there are a handful of characters who have defied all norms of human rights behaviour. They will not be allowed to participate in any future government. But if there was any kind of attempt to start a war crimes tribunal or process against a vast majority who, under normal war crimes terms would be considered war criminals, then you would not be able to form a government.

Q: So what are you really advocating?

A: One, human rights should emphasise that the new government has to demonstratively implement human rights objectives. I think human rights organizations should help facilitate this process by providing constitutional and legal lawyers and frameworks, perhaps fund legal support for Afghans to frame a new constitution and to develop human rights legislation. The Afghans will need a lot of international support for this.

Secondly, human rights organisations should limit their demands to perhaps a small list, which should be done in consensus with all the major Afghan factions and with hopefully the next government in Kabul. A small list of criminals who would not take part in any government.

Q: This implies that, for the large majority of fighters, you suggest an amnesty?

A: Yes, an amnesty apart from that small list. There is no Milosevic, [former Yugoslav president], there is no one guy who did everything, everybody did a little bit but some guys did more. Probably [Taliban leader] Mullah [Mohammad] Omar did more than Ahmad Shah Mas'ud [the late Northern Alliance commander]. Everybody has done a little bit.

Q: If a broad based structure does ever evolve in the next few months or years in Afghanistan, is not an element of the Taliban always going to be a threat to that structure?

A: Certainly there is a fear that many Taliban will escape and come to Pakistan if Taliban control is eliminated in southern Afghanistan. They have very extensive links here with the whole

madrasah culture and the Islamic parties, [and] with the intelligence agencies. It becomes very important that these elements, fleeing Taliban leaders for example, are not provided [with] the political and logistical support to create trouble in Afghanistan.

Q: Finally, are you optimistic about peace in Afghanistan?

A: I am very optimistic, contrary to most people. I am optimistic for several reasons. This is an exhausted people after 23 years of war, and nobody wants to fight any more. No warlord who breaks a consensus, once it is achieved, is going to have fighters for himself. Secondly, there is a vast humanitarian crisis. The warlords see the situation on ground. They know in the back of their minds that their days are numbered.

Thirdly, this American campaign, whatever its failures, has seriously disrupted the sources of funding for these faction chiefs. These sources of funding are no longer going to be available in the kind of quantity that they were before. But there will be, God willing, a new source of funding for a new government, which will be the reconstruction plan of Afghanistan. These faction chiefs have to be brought into this so that they have a stake in the reconstruction plan. Not for warlordism, but for construction. If they play it right, their influence and their political clout can be maintained and sustained, not through fighting, but through economic development. They will become regional chiefs, and they will be part of the economic planning of their regions:

replacing weapons with economic incentives. You bring them in through economic reconstruction, and not through funding for war. That's why it's important to achieve the neighbours' consensus, because the neighbours should be providing the economic incentives for these warlords, and not the weapons.

The fourth reason is that no Afghan even today wants the partition of the country. They want a unified country. Once this bombing campaign is over and this war effort is over, there will be an upsurge in the demands of the silent majority and civil society. The UN has a vital role to play in creating a peace lobby from this, the vast majority of the population. You will see as in Northern Ireland and Somalia, this will push these faction chiefs into consensus. Lastly, the Afghans know that this is the opportunity when the whole world is focused on them. They will never have an opportunity like this again.