

## No Progress On Extremism Until There's Representative Government

Renowned journalist Ahmed Rashid on the latest situation in the tribal belt, the mistakes made and possible solutions.

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The News on Sunday: The Americans are saying they want to deploy ground troops in Pakistan. What kind of consequences will it have?

Ahmed Rashid: I think it will be a disaster if American troops en masse were to come inside Pakistan. It would trigger off a general uprising in the NWFP by Pashtun militants which may possibly swamp the Pakistan army or divide it and lead to coups within the army. Such a trigger is not needed at all.

On the other hand I think there must be greater cooperation at the covert level between Pakistan and America; with intelligence and special forces, because clearly Pakistan has failed to capture top al-Qaeda leaders nor has it made any effort over the last two and a half years to do so. What could be beneficial is a discreet, covert, improved relationship, not just with the Americans but with NATO itself, in order to better coordinate the forces on both sides of the border.

TNS: You've talked about the consequences for Pakistan but if the US troops were to come at all, what could they possibly achieve considering their near failure in Afghanistan?

AR: I think this has become a political football for the American elections. It has got a lot to do with the Republican administration trying to position itself at a time when all the reports are saying that Afghanistan is a failed state. Seven years of American activity in Afghanistan has been a total failure, a terrible legacy for the Bush administration to have to live down in the last twelve months of his presidency. That they have failed in Iraq as well as Afghanistan could affect the Republican vote in the presidential election.

Secondly, it is a way for the Democrats to show that they would do much better and have a better strategy.

The bigger failure has been that neither the US nor the NATO have had a strategy in Afghanistan. The second part of it is that neither the Americans nor the Pakistan army have had a strategy in the North West Frontier Province. The Pakistan army has been worst at it because they have had this piecemeal attitude of making peace and then attacking and making peace and then attacking. There has been no consistent strategy or planning and, at the strategic level, there is a complete lack of trust between the militants and the people of NWFP and the army.

TNS: Many analysts think that Baitullah Mehsud is more of a top al-Qaeda leader than a local Taliban leader. Why is it so?

AR: I think Baitullah Mehsud is becoming a sort of an iconic figure like Mullah Omar and Bin Laden. He is heading this militia and a great deal is being done in his name, but it is not necessary that he is either ordering it or organizing it. There are a lot of militias acting independently of Mehsud.

This whole Islamic movement or militancy, since the 1990s, has shown in Afghanistan and Pakistan is that they need an Amir, someone who invokes the power or influence of the seventh century Arabia,

after the death of the prophet. They need someone who they can claim to be a uniting factor, given that they are operating in a very divisive tribal society. So whether it is Taliban or al-Qaeda you need a leadership at almost a supernatural level, which is what Baitullah Mehsud has become.

TNS: Do you see some sort of a merger between Taliban and al-Qaeda and to what extent?

AR: For the last two years there has been a very effective alliance between al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, Pakistani Taliban, Pakistani groups fighting in Kashmir, urban militant groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad and Harkatul Mujahideen, foreign groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, East Turkistan Movement in Muslim China. So I think there is a very broad-based alliance, of which Pakistani Taliban is playing a leading role because they have been the hosts of all these forces. All these forces are based in Pakistan, their leaders are living in Pakistan, their logistics and supply lines are here. So obviously, in order to run this, the Pakistani Taliban are playing a very critical role.

TNS: Specifically, do you see any links and coordination among the Taliban here and in Afghanistan?

AR: After 9/11 the Afghan Taliban retreated into Pakistan. They were never defeated by the Americans; they were hosted here by Pakhtun tribesmen, and by elements of the intelligence services, and the government, helped by the JUI in Quetta and Peshawar. They were able to exploit their hosts in order to rebuild their movement inside Afghanistan. But as part of that process, of rebuilding their movement in Afghanistan, they in turn ideologised their hosts, the Pakistani Pakhtuns. These Pakhtuns, who had already fought with the Taliban in the 1990s against Ahmed Shah Masud and later against Americans, were very amenable to being ideologised; also because they received a lot of money from their guests.

It is very ironical because when the Afghan Taliban were created in 1994 they were highly influenced by the madrasas in Pakistan. And now we have a backlash of that. We now have the Afghan Taliban helping create the Pakistani Taliban.

So there's this cross border fertilization that is constantly taking place. This issue cannot be addressed unless both countries address it as a regional problem. It has to be tackled as a cross-border problem and not of one country.

TNS: What do you think is the way to contain extremism and militancy which has now spread to Dara Adamkhel and Swat? And do you think the Pakistani army, in its present shape and with its present level of training, can tackle it?

AR: The first thing is that Pakistani Taliban and the alliance of extremists want to destabilise Pakistan and if possible to conquer more territory and claim NWFP as a Shariah state, that can somehow be separated from the rest of Pakistan. At the same time, they are spreading that campaign in other parts of Pakistan -- in the urban areas. With attacks in Karachi and Lahore, they are trying to destabilise the country.

The thing is that under the political dispensation of President Musharraf, there is no support in the country for a concerted campaign against extremists because there is no support for him and his government. Until there is a legitimate government, which is representative and can mobilise people to stand up and resist the extremists, we're going to go down on this score.

This is the biggest failure of the Americans -- not to understand that the real problem in Pakistan is the lack of legitimate government. It's not a question of better guns or money etc. It is a matter of legitimacy and having the people's support. The second thing is that this is also affecting the morale of the Pakistan army. We've seen how the morale has plummeted in the army, in the Frontier Corps, in

the Police; the security services are extremely scared of the militants. The tactic of suicide bombing has created enormous fear amongst them.

They also need motivation and mobilisation. I don't think that can come about with a military that one day is asking them to crack heads of civil society, of lawyers and women, and is then asking them to take on extremists at the same time. You have to decide; you can't ask the police and the military to be involved in both because it's going to confuse them.

Thirdly, the US plans to rearm the Frontier Corps and sections of military and re-train them for counterinsurgency is very necessary. The army itself has to undergo a process of reconstruction and screening because within its ranks there are a large number of extremists. I think the army chief has to screen these people out of these services before any kind of retraining programme.

TNS: You have talked of Musharraf as a weakened president with no legitimacy. But can we expect some change of policy if PPP comes into power?

AR: I think the PPP can do a great deal to mobilise the public. But will Pervez Musharraf allow them to do it? Is he going to share power? Is he going to allow the prime minister to function? We saw what happened with Shaukat Aziz. Certainly the PPP government is not going to act like Shaukat Aziz. If they do, they will be thrown out within three days. This is a political party with a political manifesto and political leadership, which needs to be treated as a proper political representative of the public. If they are elected to power and Musharraf continues with his present behaviour, we will have another crisis within weeks.

TNS: With the Americans now ready to give financial assistance for the tribal areas to the tune of 750 million dollars and some part of it reserved for Frontier Corps, there are reservations about how this money is going to be spent. Can you think of some mechanism to spend it honestly and in what order of priority?

AR: I think this entire plan is wrong and warped. What is needed first is immediate action by the Pakistani government to bring FATA into the mainstream of Pakistani politics. Now this cannot be done in one go, I accept that. FATA has to be brought under the constitution. The people of FATA should be asked through a referendum what kind of a status they want, whether they want a separate province or want to be a part of NWFP and the laws should be gradually changed. An immediate law that could be changed, even before this election, is that political parties should be allowed to operate in FATA.

Unless this happens, and unfortunately there is no American pressure for the army to do this, the situation will stay the same. This should have been done back in 2002, when the first rigged elections were held by Musharraf. Then he had a big chance to do this but he lost that opportunity. Now we've seen this virtual collapse of FATA.

To provide money now would mean you are bolstering the present setup which is a fake setup, very unpopular among the people.

At the moment there is no civil society in FATA. The Taliban have wiped them all out. The government has failed to protect the maliks, school teachers, bureaucrats, journalists and the local people who formed the civil society. In FATA there was a civil society, which has been eliminated after 9/11. The government has allowed it to be eliminated. They have either been killed by the local Taliban, or driven out as refugees. So you have the most educated people living in Karachi, Lahore and Rawalpindi. This is a criminal thing; one part of the country has been denuded of its entire civil society because of the lack of action by the government.

TNS: Looking back what do you think were the mistakes committed in Afghanistan, because we haven't

seen any stability there. Brahimi, the UN envoy who organized the Bonn conference, has recently admitted it was a mistake not to have included the Taliban in decision making process?

AR: I think Brahimi's comment is a regret that there were not more Pashtuns at Bonn which I think is absolutely correct. I doubt very much if the Taliban would have come to Bonn even if there had been an invitation.

The real failure in Afghanistan stems from a lack of US seriousness in addressing the problems of nation building and reconstruction. We now know that within months of American victory in Afghanistan, they were already preparing for Iraq and there was no intention of rebuilding Afghanistan. Rumsfeld and Cheney had no intention to spend money, time or troops. This situation persisted till around 2005 when only after Iraq started going wrong did they realise that they better do something about Afghanistan. And then we saw a much greater commitment towards building the Afghan army, police, more money etc. But by then the Taliban insurgency had caught on. And you can argue today that perhaps it was too little, too late.

TNS: What role do you see for Taliban and do you think they can be part of the new project in Afghanistan?

AR: A lot of Taliban rank and file can be bought over with inducements of rehabilitation, reconstruction -- bribes in many ways. But I think the Afghan Taliban leadership is incorrigible. They will have to be eliminated. They are not going to surrender or do a deal with the Americans or with the Karzai government.