

" Pak civil society is on the retreat: Rashid "

By Karan Thapar

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Hello and welcome to Devil's Advocate. What's happening in Pakistan and how should we understand the trauma the country's experiencing. That's the key issue I shall discuss today with one of the country's greatest writers, the author of 'Taliban' and 'Descendent to Chaos', Ahmed Rashid.

Karan Thapar: Ahmed Rashid, let's start with how you view the situation in Pakistan. You have written after Salman Taseer's death, more importantly after the response of lawyers, mullahs and civil society that "this is unleashed the mad dogs of hell. We Pakistanis are at the edge of a precipice." That sounds both depressing and serious, do you really mean it?

Ahmed Rashid: Yes, because I think the crisis that we are going through now is far more worse than anything that we have experienced. For example when East Pakistan separated and became Bangladesh. What I think shocked Pakistan is the reaction of the millions of people in support of the killer of Salman Taseer, in sympathy of the killer, the people who are supporting the blasphemy law and refusing to amend it. But I think what really has happened is the series of multiple crisis that have all come together. There is an economic crisis, which is of an enormous magnitude now and there is a global crisis that is going to be a part of that. There will also be a very serious domestic economic crisis. Inflation is running at 15-18 per cent, there is acute joblessness, there is no power, nothing. There is a political crisis - this is a coalition government run by the People's Party but there are deep in trouble with their coalition partners and the opposition is ganging up. And there is a foreign policy crisis - a lack of relations with India, with Afghanistan the things are very tense, there's terrorism and these extremists groups who the army have not been able to curtail and there are floods.

Karan Thapar: Let's first concentrate on the response to Salman Taseer's killing. In an article you wrote for the 'New York Times', you pointed out that "perhaps over 500 lawyers had lined up to defend when Qadri the killer when Salman Taseer's widow could not find even one to prosecute". You also said that in Lahore, a city of 13 million, not one mullah was prepared to read the funeral prayers. How do you explain that?

Ahmed Rashid: Well I think lot of Pakistanis as I said - the government, the army, and civil society - were taken by complete surprise. Of course the seeds of this have been apparent to people like myself for a very long time. The fact is that we have had the Pakistani Taliban on our soil, the Afghanistan Taliban, other extremists groups and they have laid now and penetrated aspects of middle class, of the educational establishments, the military, and the police. The fact that he was killed by a policeman.

Karan Thapar: You are saying that Taliban has actually infiltrated large wades of the country?

Ahmed Rashid: I won't say the Taliban, but their kind of thinking. And people want simple explanations for the crisis. People are not prepared to accept complicated explanations as to why they have been made jobless or why they are not getting an education. They want that this is all America's fault or this is India's fault or this is somebody else's fault. People don't want to analyse their own, self-made, crisis.

Karan Thapar: Is that in a sense that the Pakistani civil society is cowering or hiding in fear?

Ahmed Rashid: Well, I won't say they are cowering, people have come out and the point is that civil society is very much on the retreat. It is I would say very small, it is very frightened. There is all sorts of talks about more killings of human rights workers, NGO workers, journalists and others. But people are coming out and people are resisting.

Karan Thapar: Except for the fact, the critical people have behaved very strangely Shahbaz Sharif, chief minister of Punjab, his brother Nawaz Sharif, the former prime minister, both refuse to attend Salman Taseer's funeral even though he is the governor of their state. To many this is not surprising, it is shocking.

Ahmed Rashid: It is shocking because a lot of the political parties, frankly, did not respond to this in a way they should have as you say. Not even the People's Party frankly, has once tried to raise the issue of why he was killed, how he was killed. They are trying to blame it to some political conspiracy.

Karan Thapar: Is it too dangerous to do it personally?

Ahmed Rashid: It is too dangerous, people are too scared. Don't forget they have been attacked from politicians and Frontier in Peshawar, by the Pakistani Taliban

Karan Thapar: So people are intimidated?

Ahmed Rashid: People are becoming intimidated but I think there is going to be resistance.

Karan Thapar: But you know one of the most amazing things you wrote about in your 'New York Times' article is that "even the all powerful Pakistani army has refused to issue a single comment in support of the Salman Taseer family. What does that tell you about General Kayani and other top generals?

Ahmed Rashid: Well, I think they are very nervous right now the very fact that a special police's bodyguard killed the Governor raises so many questions.

Karan Thapar: They are scared for their own lives?

Ahmed Rashid: Yeah, I mean, what is the mood in the police services now, what is the mood in the army is this kind of thinking, this killer expressed. its this kind of thinking that is wide spread. Now I am not saying that Taliban have penetrated in there but this kind of thinking and the need for simple explanation for the crisis we are facing and what people are looking for.

Karan Thapar: So there is a fear among the top generals that league soldiers could kill the Governor of Punjab, then maybe a league soldier could army generals as well?

Ahmed Rashid: No well I don't know about that and I don't know what the mood is within the top generals but the speculation in the media so as to why the army did not issue a public statement of condolence for somebody who is after all the representative of the federation in Punjab. It was not a political position, it was a state position. This has surprised a lot of people.

Karan Thapar: I suppose the first critical question people ask is has Pakistan become an extremist and fundamentalist country?

Ahmed Rashid: I don't think so. There obviously is a very strong minority wing of extremists who have been involved in wars on both sides of our borders, who have been pushing are pushing for the overthrow of the state, who want to bring about some kind of caliphate. And there is a very small liberal part of the society which is trying to express itself and which is trying to come back. But there is a vast silent majority which is not expressing its view but which is certainly not extremist and realises that extremism is not the answer to their economic or educational or job problems.

Karan Thapar: If the silent majority stays silent the extremists will end up having their way.

Ahmed Rashid: Well, there we have the real problem which Pakistan is facing and that's the lack of leadership. There is no leadership at the moment coming out of the political parties. There doesn't seem to be much leadership even coming out of the army; not that people really want too much leadership out of the army as we've had enough of military rule. But we certainly want leadership from the politicians.

Karan Thapar: What about the army itself? Even if the country hasn't become extremist or fundamentalist many people have been saying from a long time that the Pakistan army has become extensively Islamised. This is the process that's been happening since General Zia's time. Does that worry you?

Ahmed Rashid: Well, it certainly worries people and certainly in the last few years of the army having to fight these extremists in the tribal areas, fighting the Pakistani Taliban, they've lost over 2000 men and officers in this war, I'm sure a lot of people in the army are saying why are we fighting this war and why are we killing our own people. We should come and make peace with these people and this was the result of the American presence in Afghanistan.

Karan Thapar: But peace with these people would be peace on their terms.

Ahmed Rashid: I agree with you and that was what happened during Musharraf's time. When Musharraf did cut ceasefire deals with these extremists it was on their terms and military and society lost out.

Karan Thapar: And if that were to happen again the military and society would lose out even more?

Ahmed Rashid: Much more, much more. Because I think now there is a much stronger influence of the extremists which now is not just confined to the fringes of Pakistan or the periphery of Pakistan but is really affecting the Central population area.

Karan Thapar: So how the army responds and how it overcomes its own internal debates and doubts is a critical test for Pakistan?

Ahmed Rashid: Certainly, it is a critical test. But I think what is really called for right now is a political leadership. We don't see that now. The army does not want to intervene again. It does not want power, it does not want to be responsible for beating back these extremists. After all this is a political task which has to be taken on by the politicians. People have to be educated, people have to be explained as to why the country is going through these crises.

Karan Thapar: But if the problem is the lack of political leadership, the critical is this: has the state become so weak that it can't, not just defend its citizens, but it can't even protect the principles and ideals it stands for.

Ahmed Rashid: Well, there is a real fear that if this crisis is allowed to get worse, if the leadership is not there, there is a gradual meltdown of the economy, of the law and order and all the other aspects the state should be controlling, then would be reaching a very serious impasse. I still think there is a silent majority, there is a liberal elite but the time is running out.

Karan Thapar: Could it be the case that when we look back the present civilian regime will simply feel and look much like the interregnum, much like Kerensky failed between the Romanovs and the Bolsheviks or the republic between the Weimar and the Nazis? Are we at that stage in Pakistan?

Ahmed Rashid: No because everybody wants the democracy to work. Nobody wants the army to come back again. If it's going to be a coalition government, however weak it might be people want the process to continue. They want another election. Let democracy be solidified.

Karan Thapar: Everyone wanted the Weimar republic to work but it collapsed.

Ahmed Rashid: Well, that's true. If this government does not get a grip of things we could go down that road. But I'm hoping that with the kind of pressure which is coming from the society and other parts of the establishment, the leadership would emerge.

Karan Thapar: In an article which you wrote just 10 days ago for the Global Mail in Canada you suggested that there could be an analogy between the situation in Pakistan today and the situation in Iran when the Shah was falling and Khomeini was taking over. Were you serious?

Ahmed Rashid: Well, what I was eluding to was that in Iran what happened was that the institutions of the government, the army, the police, the bureaucracy failed to stand up to the Khomeinists. And these institutions collapsed. So there was a total vacuum which Khomeini was able to fill and I feel that if we don't get a grip on the things quickly, in a year or two, these vacuums are going to be created which will be increasingly filled by extremism.

Karan Thapar: So we have just about a year or two?

Ahmed Rashid: Well, certainly. I think until the next election, we want to have another election, have to be carried out with greater semblance of law and order than we have today.

Karan Thapar: Is there a Khomeini-like figure lurking in the wings?

Ahmed Rashid: No. I think that's the big difference. There is no Khomeini in Pakistan.

Karan Thapar: But it could emerge.

Ahmed Rashid: That's another big question. Because we have acute sectarian problems. Sunni-Shia bloodletting plus a lot of infighting among the Sunnis.

Karan Thapar: That could be a saving grace.

Ahmed Rashid: That could be a saving grace. Well, I hope no one faction will allow another leader to emerge from another faction.

Karan Thapar: I want very much to talk about How Pakistan pulls back from the precipitous you say the country is standing at the edge of, but first a concern that worries people in India, perhaps even more so in the West, in the present state of confusion and chaos are Pakistan's nuclear weapons safe?

Ahmed Rashid: Well this an enormous concern in the West. I think for the time certainly they are. But, of course the killing of Taseer by the policeman does raise questions about the security of the nuclear weapons. But for the time being as we know the army is held together, there has never been an internal coup from the mid-level, there has never been in the past twenty years any kind of major unrest which would warrant suspicions. But the nuclear establishment, as in India, is enormous. I mean there are tens of thousands of people who work.

Karan Thapar: And it can be easily infiltrated.

Ahmed Rashid: Exactly. But I am sure the military and the government are taking steps to see that their whole vetting processes of individuals and security are working.

Karan Thapar: But it also follows that if things are going to go wrong, they could go wrong very quickly.

Ahmed Rashid: They could go wrong very quickly. I mean we have seen the result of just one assassination. God forbid, there is talk of more assassinations of leading personalities, politicians etc. Now God forbid if something like that happens there will be a very serious situation.

Karan Thapar: So this is actually a very genuine, serious concern. It is not just a western concern.

Ahmed Rashid: It is a genuine concern but I as I said that I'm sure that the vetting processes have been put in motion. I am sure that advice is being sought from outside.

Karan Thapar: Sure or you hope?

Ahmed Rashid: I'm certain that is the process because we've had indications of that.

Karan Thapar: Let's come back then to how Pakistan pulls back from the edge of the precipitous. What is it that needs to be done to ensure that this country does not just teeter over?

Ahmed Rashid: There has to be greater leadership from the government to bring the political parties together to combat this kind of extremism.

Karan Thapar: But how can there be greater leadership when everyone is questioning the leadership of Asif Zardari and Gilani?

Ahmed Rashid: I'm stressing two or three factors. One, there is going to be enormous international pressure and there is already and we are extremely vulnerable to international pressure because of our economy, because of Afghanistan and other things. Second, there is going to be pressure from civil society even though it may be small and not fully articulate. It does have a lot of control in media, it does have a lot of control in NGOs and a lot of development work. And third is the silent majority. They have to be mobilised.

Karan Thapar: But they are silent, that's the problem.

Ahmed Rashid: For the time being. They have to be mobilised. And the most important thing is that we have to lay at rest for the time being the kind of foreign policy adventurism we have been undertaking for so many years whether it's in Afghanistan or Kashmir. We have to focus on our domestic ills.

Karan Thapar: Will the army be prepared to lay at rest the foreign policy adventurism?

Ahmed Rashid: I have no idea. But I hope so. It is the cry need of the hour.

Karan Thapar: But what is the army doesn't change its attitude.

Ahmed Rashid: Well, then I think we are inviting more problems because we have to end this kind of diplomatic isolation in the region. We have to lay at rest these issues. We have concentrate on the domestic.

Karan Thapar: But do you see the two problems. What if the army doesn't change its attitude and two what is the domestic pressure or international pressure can't change the attitude of Zardari and Gilani. Those are the two people that rule the country at the moment. They've proved inept and inadequate. Why would the pressure succeed in changing their character and will.

Ahmed Rashid: You know the point is that the economy is going down so rapidly that the government is absolutely dependent on the IMF and the World Bank right now and the foreign aid.

Karan Thapar: But they've just rejected the IMF proposal.

Ahmed Rashid: Well they've got back to it now. They're trying to put together a package.

Karan Thapar: So they are going around in circles.

Ahmed Rashid: Well, in a way. Post this killing, they realise the importance that is IMF loan is not there, no foreign investment would come in.

Karan Thapar: But isn't there a real sense in which you are hoping for a miracle to save the country. The first miracle - the change in the army's attitude. The second miracle - the change in the conviction of the president and the prime minister.

Ahmed Rashid: Look, I think the situation is so dire and so awful right now and depressing. It's not a question of miracles. I think all the various elements in the political spectrum do realise that they have to do something to save the country.

Karan Thapar: Absolutely. They all realise they have to do something but none of them seems to be capable of doing it.

Ahmed Rashid: We have to give them more time. And there is this pressure coming from within. As I said Pakistanis have to resolve this issue. It can't just be outsiders.

Karan Thapar: I'm going to quote to you what you wrote for the New York Times: "There is nobody to save Pakistan except the Pakistanis but if the majority is silent and continues to be silent, it would suggest that even Pakistanis are not prepared to save themselves."

Ahmed Rashid: That can be down the road. At the moment, we are looking as to how can we mobilise the silent majority and how can the civil society and the government be pushed.

Karan Thapar: Who is going to do that?

Ahmed Rashid: As is said that there is a small but a very vocal civil society. There is the media. There are various other positive elements. For example, the day after Salmaan's death students were coming out on the streets supporting the killer. The mood has changed again. People are now realising because of what the teachers are telling them or what they're reading in the media that this was a wrong act. This was a murder.

Karan Thapar: So in a nutshell, Pakistan is standing at the brink. There is hope that it will take steps backwards and save itself but it could just as easily topple over.

Ahmed Rashid: It's a very, very volatile situation right now. It's a very vulnerable situation right now. But certainly the hope is that 170 million people would not allow their country to crash inwards. I hope that we will get through this.

Karan Thapar: Ahmed Rashid, a pleasure talking to you.

Ahmed Rashid: Thank you so much.

The End.