

Pakistan on the brink

CNN's Fareed Zakaria, 16/08/2011



The United States will soon begin its draw down from Afghanistan. And as that happens, greater and greater attention will be focused on next-door neighbor Pakistan. That is where much of what remains of al Qaeda's leadership lives. And it is, of course, a nuclear nation that is in terrible turmoil, filled with bombings, assassinations and what often seems like just chaos.

To talk about it all, I was joined on Sunday by the finest journalist writing in Pakistan today, Ahmed Rashid. Here's a lightly edited transcript of our interview:

Fareed Zakaria: Ahmed, the latest news out of Peshawar, this female suicide bomber wearing a veil detonates herself. Even for Pakistan this is unusual.

Ahmed Rashid: This is very unusual. We've had one or two female suicide bombers, but they've been Chechens or Central Asians. This is the first time that I know of a Pakistani woman, a young woman becoming a suicide bomber in the center of Peshawar – one of the largest cities in the country. This is very much a new development.

Fareed Zakaria: Do you look at what's going on right now and feel as though there is some kind of system in place to deal with this rising militancy? Is the army now finally mobilized? Is the political class mobilized?

Ahmed Rashid: I think, Fareed, on the country. What we've seen in the last couple of months since the killing of Osama Bin Laden is a real meltdown. The army has felt humiliated, embarrassed and demoralized to some extent. The politicians have kind of abandoned the scene and told the army, "You sort it out; this is not our problem."

There's a huge rift between the government and the army and the Americans. And that is, of course, affecting economic confidence, because we have no deal with the IMF nor the World Bank nor any of the usual big donors who should be giving money or pledging some kind of funding to Pakistan at this stage.

So there are a whole raft of issues that have arisen. which are worrying people enormously.

Fareed Zakaria: Let's talk about the rift between Pakistan and the U.S. Of course, the most recent bout of it stems from the Osama bin Laden shootings. What is the civilian government doing? What is the army doing?

Ahmed Rashid: Well, you know, first of all, this has been building up for quite some time. But the real icing on the cake has been the death of Osama bin Laden, because that is an operation carried out I think largely without Pakistani knowledge or involvement.

And the army did feel very embarrassed and humiliated. And that, of course, has created this wave of anti-Americanism, both in the public and in the army and has forced General Kayani, the Army Chief, to also show a very hard line towards the Americans. And at the moment we have a complete breakdown.

Now, in the midst of this, President Zardari has kind of abandoned the stage. We haven't seen any leadership by Zardari. For example, since bin Laden's death, he's not made a single statement on terrorism or anything like that.

Fareed Zakaria: And would it be fair to say that because of this rift in relations, the Pakistani military is not pursuing the kind of militants, the Haqqani Faction, those militants who kill Afghans and American troops and coalition troops?

Ahmed Rashid: Well, it certainly is not going to pursue it right now with this complete rift between the Pakistani military and the American military. I mean, they're barely on talking terms.

Fareed Zakaria: How do we get out of this? How do we get back to some kind of working relationship?

Ahmed Rashid: There's a huge problem here, too. And I think that problem is that there doesn't seem to be a central figure since the death of Richard Holbrooke who will deal with Pakistan? You've got Admiral Mullen, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, who has been very upfront in dealing with Pakistan. But you need a senior member of the White House or the State Department to be running the policy.

And, unfortunately, it appears from Pakistan's side that the people running the policy here are at the CIA and the U.S. military. And there's no political strategy from the American side and there's no political equivalent of Holbrooke – a Secretary of State or the Deputy Secretary of State – to get involved in talking to the Pakistanis.

Fareed Zakaria: So while all this is going on, the militancy in Pakistan, the fundamentalism, the jihadists seem to be thriving as the suicide bombing suggests?

Ahmed Rashid: Yes, absolutely. Remember, right off bin Laden's death, we had this attack on the naval base in Karachi in which two huge aircrafts were destroyed. That, too, was extremely embarrassing and humiliating for the military.

And secondly, how are we going to turn around this huge wave of anti-Westernism, anti- Americanism in an army, which for the last 60 years has been totally dependent on the Americans for arms, for weapons, for aid – something like \$20 billion has been given in the last 10 years by the Americans, a lot of it to the military for conducting operations against the Pakistani Taliban and the extremists on the border.

Now, who's going to pay for these operations? I mean, are we in a position to pay for a billion-dollar operation over three months to chase the Pakistani Taliban? I don't think we're in a position to pay for that kind of operation.

So that is going to mean the operations will be reduced. There will be increasing use of air power, less use of manpower, and the extremists are going to be taking advantage of this.

Fareed Zakaria: So, in a strange sense, Pakistan may be getting a whole lot more unstable.

Ahmed Rashid: Well, I think what is really urgently needed is for the U.S.-Pakistan relationship to return in some shape or form as quickly as possible, and for cooperation between the CIA and the military and at the political level to resume. At the moment right now we've got a very hostile American Congress that is very anti-Pakistan.

That has to be turned around. That can only be turned around if the relationship between the Obama Administration and the Pakistan government improve.

Watch the rest of the GPS interview online here. Also watch Fareed's March 2011 interview with Ahmed Rashid.

