

Q&A: Ahmed Rashid on Pakistan's Many Challenges

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By Smriti Rao

Ahead of Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari's "private visit" to India this weekend, noted Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid looks at Pakistan's state of domestic and international affairs. As its relationship with long-time ally, the United States, lurches from one crisis to another, Mr. Rashid describes Pakistan's handling of its ally, the political failure of the country's elite to respond to domestic crises, and the prospects of an Arab Spring-like phenomenon in the country. His prognosis for Pakistan remains grim. He says the country "must act like a normal state, rather than a paranoid, insecure, ISI driven entity whose operational norms are to use extremists and diplomatic blackmail."

Following are edited excerpts of an interview with Mr. Rashid, author of "Pakistan on the Brink."

In your book, you write that Pakistan is now considered the most fragile place on earth because of what might happen there politically and what it can foster elsewhere. You say it's not yet a failed state but if it continues the way it's doing right now it's sliding down the path of becoming one quickly. Why is Pakistan unraveling so rapidly now more so than any other point in its history?

I think there is an internal crisis that has really not been addressed and this is the failure of the Pakistani elite, both civil and military, to cope with the end of the Cold War and the consequences of that. The end of the Cold War presented a lot of benefits to many countries but it passed Pakistan by completely. The whole era of economic reforms, globalization, high-tech, new industries, regional trade and peace attempts, it just totally bypassed Pakistan. So we are suffering from a 20-year lag, basically, of a failure to address the problems and the advantages and the benefits that the end of the Cold War produced.

Is this because Pakistan has been so focused on India?

I think the main problem has been internal. It's been a failure of the elite to want to change its monopoly on power, on income, on the lack of taxation, on the lack of responsibility the elite has for development and the people. If you look at all the major indices, they have all gone down whether it's education or health.

Since 2004 India has not been such a major issue. Certainly, the budgetary focus, the defense spending is aimed at India, and if there is a foreign-policy dilemma in Afghanistan, it's partly India-driven. But I will say it's an internal crisis shown by a lack of vision by our politicians and generals who have not been able to wake up to reality.

If there has been a failure on the part of the elite, then what about regular people? Is there a possibility of something like an Arab Spring in Pakistan, where young Pakistanis take to the streets and demand accountability from the government?

The fear in Pakistan is on the contrary. That if there was a mass movement like that, it would probably very quickly fall into the hands of the Islamic parties and the extremists. We should remember that in the Arab world, Islamic parties were crushed and driven underground for 30-40 years and they were partly responsible for the Arab Spring, in that for the first time, they saw the freedoms and reacted in a very modern way. They are talking about democracy and women's rights and education and industry.

On the other hand, Pakistan's religious parties are not talking about any of these issues. They are not talking about issues that really concern people and, if there was an Arab Spring, they are the most organized force. Civil society is certainly there in Pakistan and has a powerful voice, I would say, through the media, through

the NGOs and human rights groups, but they are not organized.

What about politicians like Imran Khan? There seems to be a renewed sense of optimism among the younger electorate. Has the time come, perhaps, for someone like Imran Khan?

I think the attraction of Imran Khan, certainly, is that the youth - fed up of the existing political structures and the parties and the leadership that has emerged from these dynastic parties of Nawaz Sharif and the Bhuttos etc. - is responding to somebody who is new, somebody who is promising an end to corruption and everything else.

But the problem with Imran is that his foreign policy parameters remain almost exactly the same. In other words, the pre-Cold War parameters. For example, he's not talking about ending tensions with India; he's not talking about ending interference in Afghanistan; he's not talking about bringing in the extremists groups - either reconciling with them or forcing them to give up the practices they are engaged in. He's not talking about the crisis in Baluchistan and the separatist movement there.

The real crisis is other countries generally have foreign policies that reflect the domestic situation in that country. Pakistan, unfortunately, has always had a foreign policy, especially since the end of the Cold War, that has actually enormously damaged the country, and undermined growth and development. And that is what you have to come to terms with. You can't get to grips with corruption if you're still going to be dependent on American aid and not be self-sustaining, or be dependent on the diktats of the extremists.

America and Pakistan seem to be lurching from one crisis to another - first Osama bin Laden's killing, then the November incident where 24 Pakistani troops were killed by NATO aircraft. How would you assess US-Pakistan's relations right now? Is this their lowest point?

I think there is an attempt now to get back on track. We have had three meetings in the past weeks, including President Obama meeting the PM, the U.S. Army generals meeting with the Pakistani Army and (Special U.S. Representative on Afghanistan and Pakistan) Marc Grossman's meeting with (President) Zardari. So we've had three meetings in the space of five days.

Now, we have to see the results. Obviously, the first result that should come is the opening up of the road from Karachi for NATO supplies. The other problem is of course, there is a huge internal crisis - energy, political, economic - and the Parliament that was supposed to pass this list of demands that were to be negotiated with the U.S. still hasn't even submitted it, even though it had that list 10 days ago.

So, I don't think anything can open until Parliament finalizes this list. But the very fact that the Americans have conducted these meetings and the Pakistanis have accepted these meetings means obviously something is going to get back on track.

What will determine the endgame for Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan? What will be in the tipping point for Pakistan, when it wakes up and says, maybe we should look at our own internal crisis?

I really don't know. The leadership is not doing that. Now we have this crisis with electricity and gas again. There has been rioting on the streets in Lahore and in Punjab. The leadership is not waking up to the really sad realities.

This is one of the tragedies of not understanding the end of the Cold War. There's this feeling that somehow the Americans will come bail us out, the Chinese will come bail us out. In this day and age, nobody will come and bail you out. There is a global economic crisis and this is not how a modern state, in this era, works. You don't bail out allies. Especially allies that are not prepared to carry out reforms.

Look at the hardship, for example, that people are enduring in major European countries. People have taken huge drops in their salaries, they have been rendered unemployed. Austerity is the name of the game in Europe. We don't see any of this in Pakistan. Obviously, we cannot progress unless we tighten our belts and pursue greater austerity. The example of Europe is before us, yet the leadership doesn't take that into account.

Let's talk about U.S.-Afghan relations and the planned U.S. withdrawal in 2014. What will the U.S. and NATO

leave behind when they pull out?

We don't know. It's very difficult to say right now. I think the whole program has to be reassessed. The Americans want to stay on. They want to keep 20,000 troops behind, but that could prove to be very difficult. We saw what happened in Iraq, they wanted to keep 20,000 troops in Iraq. And Iraqis asked them to leave. There are no troops there. I think everything is very unsettled at the moment.

What is your sense of India-Pakistan relations?

I think we have taken steps forward on that front. The ceasefire has been holding for 7-8 years. There have been trade talks, which have been encouraging. India has offered to export electricity to Pakistan. I wouldn't exactly say a breakthrough, but there has been a huge warming up of relations compared to what was there before.

Do you think economic ties are overruling the way India feels about Pakistan-sponsored terrorism?

I think India would not like to see Pakistan suffer more economically, because that could put a burden on the entire region.

In your book, you say Pakistan must act as a normal state, rather than a paranoid, insecure, ISI-driven entity whose operational norms are to use extremists and diplomatic blackmail. How far is Islamabad from being a "normal state?"

At the moment, I would say what I said before. I don't see the leadership having the vision to reform. The two key words are "change" and "reform."

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