

## National Public Radio

Journalist Ahmed Rashid, author of best sellers "Taliban" and "Jihad," talks about Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, opposition facing him, US policy in Pakistan and rise of the Taliban.

04/05/2007

TERRY GROSS, host: This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross.

Pakistan has become "Terrorism Central," according to my guest, journalist Ahmed Rashid, yet the Bush administration counts Pakistan's president, Pervez Musharraf, as an ally in the war on terror. Musharraf's future is unclear. He's facing protests from the middle class and from extremists, his five-year term expires this year but Rashid says in Pakistan, there's no institutionalized democratic succession process and the constitution is a mere piece of paper that can be altered by decree. So it's unclear what happens next for Musharraf or Pakistan's relationship to the US. Ahmed Rashid is the author of the best-selling books, "Taliban" and "Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia." He's based in Pakistan and has covered the region for several English publications, including The International Herald Tribune and the Daily Telegraph of London. Rashid has been in London the past few days. Earlier today he went to a BBC studio to record our interview. I asked why he describes Pakistan as Terrorism Central.

Mr. AHMED RASHID: Well, I think it's very clear now, according to the NATO and American intelligence that Osama bin Laden and the key hundred or so Arabs who are running al-Qaeda are really sitting now in Pakistan proper, and along with them are their allies from central Asia, from Chechnya, from southeast Asia, and they are inhabiting the tribal belt which runs along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, but they're considered to be very much inside Pakistan.

Secondly, you have this spate of Pakistani militants who are both, if you like, Pakistani Taliban, but militants who have been fighting in Kashmir, who have been fighting in other places and who are linked to al-Qaeda and have been providing assistance to Pakistani groups worldwide. We saw, for example, the London bombing in July two years ago. They were clearly linked back to some of these Pakistani militant groups, who in turn were linked back to al-Qaeda.

So this--and then, of course, we have the old Taliban, sitting in Pakistan. Mullah Omar is believed to be in Pakistan. Other leaders of the Taliban are believed to be in Pakistan. So there is an enormous widespread confluence of interests here with militants and extremists from all over the world sitting in Pakistan.

GROSS: You say that Musharraf is cooperating with President Bush in fighting against al-Qaeda in the war on terror, but Musharraf is allowing the Taliban to grow stronger. I mean, do you see Musharraf as allowing the Taliban to grow stronger or are the Taliban growing stronger because Musharraf has no control?

Mr. RASHID: I think all the evidence that we saw last year with the Taliban offensive in the summer of 2006 and now the one that's expected in the summer of 2007, they have got access now to an enormous logistics. They fielded something like eight or nine thousand troops with new weapons, very sophisticated communications equipment, ammunition. Now this kind of logistics is not available in Pakistan or in Afghanistan even though both countries are awash with weapons. Clearly there is very, I think, obviously, covert but very strong backing from the Inter-Services Intelligence, the ISI, that is the main intelligence agency of Pakistan. And I think, you know, what the Americans have been demanding now clearly is a crackdown on the Taliban.

The tragedy is being that Bush has allowed Musharraf over the last five years to be very selective as to who he goes after. So, in that sense, Musharraf has occasionally gone after al-Qaeda, captured al-Qaeda people, handed them over to the Americans but has not gone after the Taliban leaders, and the Americans really haven't pushed him on that issue. It's only in the last six months to a year that the American military have realized that, in fact, as far as stabilizing Afghanistan is concerned, the Taliban is probably a bigger threat now than al-Qaeda.

GROSS: Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai recently accused Pakistan's intelligence agencies of sheltering Mullah Mohammed Omar, the Taliban leader, in Quetta. So what are some of the tensions developing now between Pakistan and Afghanistan because of the Taliban?

Mr. RASHID: Well, there are very acute tensions, which really also have developed between President Karzai and President Bush, and the tension is really put this way by the Afghans. The Afghans say, 'Well, the Americans are obsessed with al-Qaeda. They're only pushing and pressurizing Pakistan to capture al-Qaeda, and the Americans are not caring about the Taliban, whereas the real threat to Afghanistan, the insurgency, the control of the drugs and the opium trade, etc., is not coming from al-Qaeda. The real threat to Afghanistan is coming from the Taliban, and on that score the Americans are not putting enough pressure on Musharraf to deal with it.

The Pakistanis, of course, come to that and say, 'We are doing a lot on al-Qaeda and we're trying to do our best on the Taliban,' but the fact remains that until perhaps recently--perhaps until recently when Vice President Dick Cheney visited Pakistan and delivered quite a tough message to President Musharraf last month about this issue of the Taliban, the Americans always treated the Taliban as something that was not particularly important.

GROSS: You know, getting back to Karzai for a second, President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan recently suggested to New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof in an interview that the Pakistani government wants the Afghan government to fail so that Pakistan can use the Taliban to turn Afghanistan into a colony of Pakistan. Does that make any sense to you? I mean, that Pakistan would be trying to turn Afghanistan into a colony of Pakistan. What is Hamid Karzai talking about?

Mr. RASHID: Well, you know, I think President Karzai is probably exaggerating a bit there. I don't think Pakistan wants him or the Afghan government to fail. They don't want to see chaos and a return to warlordism inside the country, but I think they want to see a couple of things. They want to see their nominees, that is the Pakistani nominees from the Afghan Pashtuns brought into the government, into the cabinet perhaps, and that includes Taliban. Now that is something that is very difficult for Karzai to do right now because the Pashtuns are the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, but the other ethnic groups who are also quite substantial are very much opposed to the Pashtun Taliban, that is the Uzbeks, the Tajiks, the Hazaras. The last thing they want to see is for a return of the Taliban.

Now I think what Karzai is talking about there is this Pakistani hankering to dominate the government in Kabul, that the Kabul government should only be friendly to Pakistan. It should be an appendage to Pakistan. I think, you know, that is possibly true. I think that's the way the Pakistan military has thought for the last 25 years and continues to think.

GROSS: Explain to me some more why Musharraf wants the Pashtun Taliban on his side.

Mr. RASHID: Well, I think what's important to know is that the Afghan Taliban, that is the Afghan Pashtun Taliban have been Pakistan's proxy force since 1994, when, of course, the Taliban first arose, and then, you know, swept through the country and conquered most of the country, and between '94 and 9/11, the Taliban were a pretty awful horrible regime which, of course, gave sanctuary to bin Laden and al-Qaeda and banned education and all the rest of it. But they were extremely friendly to the Pakistani military, and they did not allow India, the rival of Pakistan, they did not allow the Indians to set up an embassy even in Afghanistan, and, of course, that suited Pakistan wonderfully. Now I think that the problem here is that a lot of the Pakistani military establishment still has a hankering to go back to those gold old days when the Afghan government was pro-Pakistan. It never allowed India any kind of access on Pakistan's western border, and it kept all the other neighbors at bay, and obviously that kind of situation is no longer possible because you do have now a sovereign Afghan government.

GROSS: My guest is journalist Ahmed Rashid. He lives in Pakistan and is the author of the best sellers "Taliban" and "Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia."

We'll talk more after a break. This is FRESH AIR.

(Announcements)

GROSS: If you're just joining us, my guest is Ahmed Rashid, a journalist from Pakistan who's been covering that region for many years. His books include the best sellers "Taliban" and "Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia," and he's joining us today from the BBC in London.

Recently, it was like last September, President Musharraf of Pakistan signed an agreement with tribal leaders in that border area between Pakistan and Afghanistan where a lot of extremist Islamic leaders are now. What was that agreement that was signed?

Mr. RASHID: The agreement that was signed between the Pakistan army and the tribal militants in Waziristan was essentially an agreement whereby the militants who comprised both Pakistani tribesmen and Afghan tribesmen, that they would not attack US forces and Afghan forces inside Afghanistan, and they would also not attack Pakistani forces, who were trying to keep the peace in Waziristan. Now what happened simply was that the Pakistani army pulled out of Waziristan and handed over large chunks of territory to these Taliban, and what happened was that these Taliban then stopped attacking Pakistani forces but actually stepped up attacks on American forces inside Afghanistan.

In fact, two months ago, General Eikenberry, the former commander of US forces, told me that attacks coming out of Waziristan have gone up three times since the peace deal was signed, and, of course, that immediately raised suspicions that the Pakistanis had done a deal under the table with the militants, which was that, well, 'As long as you don't attack Pakistani troops, that's all right, but if you want to go ahead and attack American troops, well, we can't stop you.' Which is true, of course, because the army had pulled out. There was no mechanism to stop these militants going into Afghanistan and attacking American forces. So actually the deal has really not been very successful.

GROSS: A few weeks ago Vice President Cheney spoke to President Musharraf of Pakistan. What was the message that Cheney delivered to him?

Mr. RASHID: Well, I think, you know, Cheney has always been very close to Musharraf and has absolutely refused to criticize him in public or his policies, but I do think the message, to Cheney, was what really was a message of tough love. And that is that the Bush administration is facing huge problems. The Democrats now control Congress. The Democrats want to pull out of Iraq and actually want to commit more forces and more money to Afghanistan, and the Democrats are all criticizing Musharraf and they're criticizing the Bush administration for being too close to Musharraf.

So I think that the message Cheney was delivering was simply that, 'Look, we're under huge pressure from the Democrats. Help us out here,' you know. 'Help us out by catching some Taliban, by catching some al-Qaeda and stopping support for the Taliban.' Now I don't think it was an acrimonious message. I don't think, you know, some of the presses portrayed that Cheney went and read the riot act to Musharraf. I don't think the Bush administration treats Musharraf like that. They very much want him to stay on in power and want him to, you know, continue being there. But I think they do want him to do more than he's been doing, and, of course, now that does include doing more about the Taliban.

GROSS: Why does the Bush administration want Musharraf to stay in power?

Mr. RASHID: Well, I think, you know, the Bush administration preferred dealing with authoritarian regimes in this so-called war on terror. It's just much easier. I think the last thing the Bush administration would like to see--would like to see an elected government in Pakistan because then you'd have to deal with a president, a prime minister, foreign minister, parliament, etc., etc. Here you just deal, you know, with one man who makes all the decisions. That's the first thing. I think, secondly, Musharraf has served the Bush administration well in the sense that the Bush administration has been very much obsessed with catching al-Qaeda. And, thirdly, in the early years, 2002, 2003, Pakistan handed over some 500 members of al-Qaeda to the Americans, many of whom are now in Guantanamo Bay, and many of the top leaders of al-Qaeda. However, of course, the top hierarchy, Osama bin Laden and his number two Ayman al-Zawahiri, have still not been caught, but--and I think, you know, the third reason is when--if the Bush administration is thinking about putting pressure on Iran, and, of course, the big danger is that, you know, the Bush administration may actually bomb Iran because of its nuclear--may bomb its nuclear power plants. And I think the--people like Cheney are expecting Musharraf to give some help to the American administration. And, in fact, there are already signs of that happening.

GROSS: What are the signs?

Mr. RASHID: Well, the Iranians have very bluntly accused Pakistan of allowing the CIA and American Special Forces to operate from Pakistani territory adjacent to Iran and, in fact, are helping the Iranian dissident groups who go into Iran, make attacks, kill Iranian officials and then come back to their sanctuary in Pakistan. Now there have been very private but very strong complaints from the Iranian side. Pakistan, of course, denies it. They say Musharraf has publicly said that 'It would be horrible if America attacks Iran. We don't want anything like that, and we would not help the Americans do anything.' But I think the feeling in Islamabad, very much, is that Musharraf is still wanting to support the Taliban, he's wanting not to hand over all the Taliban, and so he's buying time from the Americans by helping the Americans out vis-a-vis Iran in order to buy time for the Taliban. This is--you know--I mean, nobody can actually prove this, and it's more--but it's certainly a very strong feeling that's doing the rounds amongst official

circles in Islamabad and the diplomatic community.

GROSS: I just want to say the relations that you're describing in the region are so complex and contradictory as to be absolutely baffling to an outsider. Like, if you're not following this closely, those kind of shifting alliances and convoluted alliances, it's just so complex and so difficult to sort out and probably really problematic, too.

Mr. RASHID: I agree with you. They're incredibly complex. I mean, we haven't even talked about, you know, the growing role of China, you know, what Russia wants, what India is trying to do. I mean, all of these big powers in the region have their own interests, and they have their own interests in Pakistan, in India and they have their own interests inside Afghanistan, and they have their own interests vis-a-vis Iran as well. So it's incredibly complicated, and, unfortunately, I mean the oversimplification of this has been done by the Bush administration. For example, if we see the problems that Musharraf is facing inside Pakistan, domestically, with the whole issue of the near Pakistani Taliban and now the protest movements against him. There's absolutely--you know, it's very clear there's no Plan B in Washington. There's no plan as to, 'Well, what do we do, what do we Americans do if Musharraf was overthrown tomorrow or, God forbid, assassinated tomorrow?' And I think, you know, the stark reality of the State Department is being--its complete failure to talk to a wider variety of Pakistanis, which includes the opposition party, the opposition leaders, civil society, etc., and actually try and understand what's going on, and also try and, you know, perhaps put pressure on Musharraf. Perhaps also try and put together some kind of Plan B that if these protest movements mount, if Musharraf comes under real pressure, and there's a demand for democracy and an election, that the Americans should be there with some kind of support.

GROSS: You know, earlier you were talking about something that seems so paradoxical. You said that one of the things that the Bush administration likes about Musharraf is that he's--you know, he's basically a dictator. He runs the army. He runs the presidency. He doesn't--he controls the parliaments. So you don't have to worry--if you want Pakistan to do something, you don't have to worry about dealing with a democracy and a parliament and a conflicted parties and so on. There's one guy who's going to get the job done for you, and it's such a paradoxical observation to make about the Bush administration's relationship with Musharraf because the Bush administration has described its goal as spreading democracy through that region. Yet it finds it much easier to work with a dictator.

Mr. RASHID: Well, I mean precisely--and this is why so many Pakistani liberals and middle-class people are so cynical of the Bush administration and American policy because it seems, you know, whatever the Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice says about democracy, for example, in the Middle East, etc., statements she's made in Egypt and statements she's made about Saudi Arabia, somehow they don't apply to Pakistan, and this is, of course, you know, what is so--what I'm so frightened personally. That, you know, first of all you not only have the growth of extremism and fundamentalism and anti-Westernism in general in Pakistan, which, of course, is also anti-democracy, and the extremists certainly don't want a democracy. But you have your liberal elite, your educated people also becoming very strongly anti-American because they see that, you know--the Americans, you know, just want to, you know, have their cake and eat it too. They want to talk about democracy but that doesn't affect their policy of backing Musharraf.

So I think this is where America is really losing, I think, public opinion around the Muslim world that Muslims, you know--ordinary Muslims who are not linked to extremism, who just, you know, would like to see democracy, would like to be friends with America, I think what they're seeing is this huge double standard of this administration, and it has really lost allies. I mean, people who should be friends of America are not friends with America and are very, very cynical of America right now because of this failure to be consistent on this issue of democracy.

GROSS: Ahmed Rashid is the author of the best sellers "Taliban" and "Jihad." He's based in Pakistan. He'll be back in the second half of the show.

I'm Terry Gross, and this is FRESH AIR.

(Soundbite of music)

(Announcements)

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR.

I'm Terry Gross back with Ahmed Rashid, author of the best-selling books "Taliban" and "Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia." He's Pakistani and has covered the region for several English-language publications. He's recently been writing about how Pakistan has become a haven for terrorists and why President Musharraf is facing

protests from the middle class and opposition from extremists. The Bush administration considers Musharraf a major ally in the war on terror.

Well, let's get to President Musharraf. His five-year term is ending but that doesn't necessarily mean that there's going to be a real election. What is supposed to happen?

Mr. RASHID: Well, the game plan as Musharraf wanted it a month ago was that he would run for president in August for another five-year term and also amend the constitution once again so that he could keep his uniform on. In other words, he could be president and army chief, and that election would be undertaken by the present sitting National Assembly. That is, the present parliament would elect him, which, of course, is against all constitutional normalities because the president should be elected by the new parliament, not by the old parliament, and following that, he would then have a general election at the end of this year, which would elect a new parliament, and presumably that general election would be heavily rigged. The leading opposition leaders were all sitting in exile in London or the Gulf Arab states would not be allowed to take part. It would be a rigged election, and it would result in another rigged parliament.

Now what has really happened is that this game plan seems to have gone askew completely with the recent protest movements.

GROSS: And one of those protest movements was sparked when Musharraf fired the chief justice of Pakistan. Why did he fire him and why was there so much outrage?

Mr. RASHID: Well, exactly, and I mean, you know, that is closely linked to his game plan. The fact was that he didn't trust the chief justice because there was certain--you know, people would take many of the things that Musharraf wanted to do, such as stand for election, such as keep his army uniform. People would take these cases to the supreme court and ask for a judgment. 'Is this legal or is this illegal?' And Musharraf felt that the chief justice may give a judgment against the military and against Musharraf, and so he very confidently and very arrogantly thought that, 'Well, I'll just remove this guy and bring in a new chief justice.' This is what military dictators do all the time. And he completely misjudged the mood in the country, which was, that after eight years of military rule, people are tired and particularly the urban, educated elite are tired. And what happened was that the lawyers came out massively in support of the chief justice and have demanded for the last month in a series of protests that Musharraf should resign now simply. And joining the lawyers, of course, have been the opposition parties, civil society groups, NGOs, human rights groups, women's groups. And we haven't seen a kind of mass movement yet, like an Orange Movement in Ukraine or something, but what you have is very much the elite coming out, the urban elite now, coming out and saying, 'Enough is enough. We're tired of army rule. We want Musharraf to go. We want a free and fair election, and we want civilian--a free and fair contest for the presidency, which should be fought out between civilian politicians and not just have this one army and nominee.'

GROSS: And we've seen on the news scenes of lawyers in suits having direct confrontations with the police in Afghanistan. It was really, you know, a kind of amazing protest. What has the crackdown against this new protest movement been like?

Mr. RASHID: Well, actually, if you lie to them even more. I mean, at the beginning of this protest movement, there was a feeling that the government would bring out its lawyers, in other words, lawyers who supported Musharraf, and, in fact, what we've seen is there are hardly any lawyers now who support Musharraf, and the entire judicial system has literally been paralyzed for the last month because every two or three days, the lawyers are out in the streets or they've gone on a strike or they're going--they've gone...(unintelligible) so the judicial system has really been paralyzed, and, of course, you know, there have been a series of strikes, and so I think, you know, it's a war of attrition now between Musharraf and the lawyers, but I think what would be the result of this, I think two things have happened. I think the first is there's no way now that Musharraf can implement his game plan. That is to stand as president from--to get elected by this present parliament and then to go for a rigged general election. And, frankly, anything he does now to keep himself in power--and he has to make a decision on this very soon because he has to make a decision by June or July--anything he does to keep himself in power is going to lead to more protests and more aggravation on the streets. So I think it's a no-win situation for Musharraf, and, eventually of course, the real arbiter of power is the army, and the army is going to have to decide, sooner rather than later I feel, that 'Is Musharraf now becoming a liability for us, the military as an institution, because he is our chief and we support him, but this public protest is targeting the army as much as Musharraf and...'

GROSS: How is it targeting the army?

Mr. RASHID: Well, I mean, people are saying that, you know, 'We're tired of military rule. We want the military to go back to barracks. We don't want the military to be running affairs. The military--we don't want the military to--as it has for the last few years, they've taken over the media, the universities, you know, the civil bureaucracy. They've got the best jobs and people are tired of all this. I mean, even the bureaucracy is fed up because a lot of bureaucracy, their jobs have gone because they've been taken up by army officers. So what people now really want is for the army to go back to the barracks, and people--and I think what the army is going to have to come to grips with the fact that they don't want to be sullied with the fact that, you know, that Musharraf has been targeted and then, at a secondary level, the army is being targeted.

And I think the other thing the army's going to realize down the road, pretty soon, is that Musharraf just can't deliver now. The opposition is not willing to do a deal with him. They're not willing to talk to him. The lawyers are not willing to accept what he does, so he's not the man now to do, you know, a grand reconciliation.

GROSS: So it sounds like you have, you know, like the educated middle class in Pakistan opposing Musharraf now, but you also have the extremist Islamic groups opposing Musharraf, too.

Mr. RASHID: Exactly, and I...

GROSS: Or, at least, some of them. At least, many of them.

Mr. RASHID: Well, Terry, I mean, you really hit the nail on the head. I mean, that's the crux of the whole issue, in my opinion. If--obviously, it is very important that the extremists who are capable of bringing out thousands of their students, of their young people out into the streets and creating mayhem, that the extremists don't get control of this opposition movement, and there is a very fine line being drawn by this educated elite coming out and the extremists who are backing them at the moment, that the extremists would well be thinking and the Islamic parties and the extremist groups would well all be thinking, 'Well, once this movement takes off, we'll just bring our madrasah is, the students who are studying Islamic law in these colleges, out into the streets, and we'll just take over the whole movement and, you know, force the army to throw out Musharraf and declare an Islamic state.' Now, that is, you know--a very fine line has to be drawn, and I think this is where the Americans are failing very badly. If the Bush administration does not come down on the side of the democratic movement and the civil elite and the middle class movement as you call it, very soon--and the West doesn't show support for this, I think--or some kind of suggestion that it would--that it is not totally in bed with Musharraf as it were, I think the big danger is that the Islamists will say, 'Well, this middle-class movement is just a bunch of lawyers. They're not supported by anyone or the international community. This is the time for us to make our move.'

GROSS: So what are Musharraf's options now?

Mr. RASHID: I think very, very poor, you know. I think he has two options, really. The first option is to crack down and to actually declare martial law or to declare an emergency and to put hundreds of people into jail, but it's a--that's a totally no-win option because, at the end of that, he can't have an election. He can't--he can continue cracking down for perhaps a year or two, but ultimately he'll have to go, and the crackdown can only be of a limited time.

The second option is to do another U-turn. He's done several U-turns in his eight years, to do another U-turn and to say, 'OK, I'm not standing as a president in July, but I will oversee a free and fair election,' and is he capable of doing that? Well, the people around him don't want him to leave, obviously. They want him to try and work out some kind of, you know, middle ground by which he can regain the trust of the political parties. I just don't think that's possible, and I think a political U-turn--he might try it, but I don't think now he has the credibility or the trust of the political parties to actually implement a free and fair election.

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What do you know about what the US is doing now behind the scenes in support of, or not in support of, Musharraf?

Mr. RASHID: Well, everybody in Pakistan, as you can imagine, and in Europe, actually, are watching very closely the almost daily statements that are coming out of the State Department at every, you know, the daily press conference at the State Department. There's a question on Pakistan every single day for the last one month, and so far the State Department and the White House are very strongly backing Musharraf, but over the last couple of days, there have been hints. They've been talking about the rule of law, the need for a free and fair election, and, for example, suggesting that the government should not be jailing opponents because hundreds of people have been put into jail over the last few weeks. So there's a slight hint that perhaps the State Department might be shifting a bit.

But the key thing is that I don't think--certainly the shift is not of much magnitude. It's not having that kind of effect on the public in Pakistan. But I think, you know, by and large, the Americans are very worried. They're worried because they don't have a Plan B. They don't have any other options apart from Musharraf. They haven't been exploring other options over the last two or three years, which they should have been. And I think Condoleezza Rice has really failed here to understand the complexity of the situation in Pakistan.

Earlier American administrations have been far more nuanced and understanding about the complexities, about the politics in Pakistan, and I think they're really having to scramble now a Plan B at how to show support for perhaps leaders like Benazir Bhutto and other leaders without actually dumping Musharraf. So I mean, it's got to be more and more of a difficult thing for the State Department to do.

GROSS: What do you think the odds are that extremists would take over Pakistan?

Mr. RASHID: I think the odds are very small, and the odds are being constantly being exaggerated by the army and by Musharraf. But the fact is that, in a free and fair election, the extremists have never got more than 10, 11 percent of the vote. Now the threat of extremism in Pakistan is relegated to one area, and that is the Pashtun tribes along the border and some of the population who supports them--the Pashtun population in the northwest frontier province. But the Pashtuns comprise only 20 percent of Pakistan. They are not the largest ethnic group, which is Punjab, and they're certainly not that kind--nowhere near that kind of extremism in Punjab. There are extremist groups but they don't have that kind of mass following which could allow them either to launch a coup or to win an election. So it has been, I think, in Musharraf's interest to constantly harp to the Americans' wealth--you know, after me, as Louis XIVth said, you know, when the French Revolution was coming, well, 'After me the deluge. If you don't back me up, then the Islamic flood is coming, and I'm holding back the dam, as it were.' Well, I think this is a highly exaggerated thing and something unfortunately the Bush administration have fallen for for a good many years.

GROSS: How has all the political turmoil that you're talking about affected day-to-day life in Pakistan?

Mr. RASHID: Well, it is--it has affected it enormously. I mean--first of all, the courts are paralyzed, and you know the courts have--I wouldn't even say thousands, I would probably say millions of cases which are backlogged, you know, which go back 20 years and because, you know, the system has been so inefficient, and now and everybody has some kind of litigation in the courts. It's a hugely litigious society. So I mean, first of all, you know, the paralysis of the courts have been quite marked and noted by people. And, secondly, you know, the fact that people are watching this--you know, the middle-class elite come out and you have very well-dressed, glamorous women, very well-dressed men. You know, all--you know, the kind of people who come out last in a mass movement, you know? Here you have the opposite. Here you have a mass movement starting up with the elite coming out first of all and the masses, as it were, possibly following the elite. Normally what you get is you get, you know, political activists, young people, students, masses coming out and then the political elite comes out right at the end when they see that, you know, the government is about to go down the tubes. Now here it's been the opposite.

GROSS: We've been talking about Pakistan and Afghanistan. Let me just change the subject a little bit and move to Iran. There's been a lot of speculation over the past few months about whether the United States is actually planning on a military strike against Iran because of Iran's nuclear program, and I'm wondering what your reading is on that.

Mr. RASHID: Well, of course, there's been enormous fear in the region about this and with its western neighbors, which is what I'm most concerned about, that is Afghanistan and Pakistan. There's enormous fear for two reasons. The first is that both Pakistan and Afghanistan have quite strong Shia minorities, and the big danger would be that Iran would stoke up these Shia minorities to take on the state, to take on both the Pakistan state and the Afghan state, and that, of course, could lead to a Sunni backlash, and you would have the kind of sectarian warfare that we are seeing in Iraq right now come about in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and, of course, that would be very dangerous.

The second big fear is that, of course, Pakistan and Afghanistan are both American allies, and people are already convinced that, in fact, Americans are using Pakistan and Afghanistan to undermine Iran's western borders and to send in dissident groups and attack Iranian officials, and, in fact, the Iranians have been very upset about this and--but the danger of this is if there's a bombing campaign against Iran, the Americans will force or persuade or bribe perhaps the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan to help the American war effort in Iran, and, of course, that would be disastrous because both countries need good relations with Iran. They're both neighbors with Iran. They have trade, language, cultural, all sorts of links with Iran that go back centuries, and the last thing they could afford to do was to be caught in a trap between the Americans pressurizing them and the Iranians pressurizing them.

GROSS: Is there a sense in the region that the United States is likely to attack Iran?

Mr. RASHID: Well, there is, unfortunately. I found in London, actually, talking to officials and experts that in Europe, at least, it seems, there's--I was in Paris also recently. Here it seems that people are saying there's less of a chance, but I have to tell you that in Kabul and Islamabad, in Delhi, in our part of the world, there's still a very strong feeling that if this present policy of the Bush administration in Iraq, that is the surge, and trying to keep the peace in Baghdad and then in other cities fails in the next three or four months, the likelihood is that the Bush administration is then likely to try and expand the war, blame the failure of the surge on Iran and then expand the war and say, 'Well, it's all the fault of Iran, and now we have to deal with Iran.' And, of course, you know, that would really affect the region, the whole western side of Iran and then the neighboring countries very, very severely.

GROSS: My guest is journalist Ahmed Rashid. He lives in Pakistan and is the author of the best sellers "Taliban" and "Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia."

We'll talk more after a break. This is FRESH AIR.

(Announcements)

GROSS: My guest is Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid. He's covered the region for several English-language publications and is the author of the best sellers "Taliban" and "Jihad." He's been writing about Pakistan and Afghanistan.

President Bush's second term will expire soon. Is there a sense in the region that American policy might change a lot after the president leaves office, particularly since the war in Iraq has become so unpopular in the United States?

Mr. RASHID: Yes, there is. I mean, there's a very keen sense of that and there's--I have never seen officialdom in Pakistan and Afghanistan watching the Democrats as closely as they are right now. We should remember, the Pakistani military have always been very close to the Republicans, and Musharraf's close ties to the Bush administration is no accident. It happened right from Eisenhower, you know, right down the line to President Reagan, to the elder Bush, to this President Bush. The military's always been very close to the Republicans, and the Democrats have always been very tough with Pakistan and, in fact, have always put sanctions on Pakistan, either because of extremism or because of its nuclear program. And likewise, Hamid Karzai. I mean, Hamid Karzai was really brought to power by the Republicans, and the Democrats have been much more critical of him, much more critical of Bush's policy in Afghanistan, much more critical of US policy in Afghanistan. We've seen all--you know, some of the leading American candidates and Democrats have been very critical of Karzai and critical of Bush. Now they are promising more money and troops for Afghanistan, but they're demanding also that Karzai perform better and improve governance, deals with corruption, deals with drugs, etc., etc.

So clearly, I think both these leaders would be coming under a lot of pressure and--but there's also the hope, I think, that a Democratic administration would perhaps try--deal much more seriously with resolving the crisis in the Middle East. And rather than--I mean, we've seen Nancy Pelosi's visit to Syria, and you know, it's been seen in the region almost that, you know, Nancy Pelosi is running American foreign policy right now. Condi Rice is nowhere because Condi Rice refuses to speak to anyone. She doesn't speak to the Syrians. She doesn't speak to the Iranians. She doesn't speak to the Pakistani opposition either. She's refusing to speak to them. So the Democrats clearly have a more open-door policy. They want to speak to everyone, and they want to go in--back to what was the essence of American foreign policy, which was engagement. I mean, you talk to your friends and you talk to your enemies.

GROSS: So, you've painted once again a very complex picture that although a lot of leaders in the region think that the war in Iraq has created mayhem in their region, leaders of Afghanistan and Pakistan are afraid that when Bush leaves office, they're losing their ally and they don't know what to expect from the Democrats who have had questions about their leadership.



Mr. RASHID: Yes, absolutely. I mean the fact is that both President Musharraf and President Karzai owe a great deal to President Bush, and the Democrats are going, you know--if there's going to be a Democratic victory, or even if another Republican comes in, I just don't see that kind of relationship sustaining itself. For example, I mean, the way that Bush has, if you like, given Musharraf a pass on not grabbing hold of the Taliban leaders living in Pakistan. I don't think a Democrat president or even another Republican president would give Musharraf that kind of pass. I don't think a new leader in America will give Karzai a pass on the extent of corruption within the Afghan government right now, people very close to Karzai. You know, they will demand more action from him.

GROSS: Before we let you go, you've been in London the past few days. So I'm wondering what you think you've learned about Iran and about the West by watching how the crisis between England and Iran played out after Iran captured British sailors, sailors who they just released.

Mr. RASHID: What has been so surprising here, of course, has been the very great criticism that the British media is carrying out against Tony Blair. Of course, there's criticism of the Iranian president and Iran's actions, but actually everybody's talking about Blair's incompetence, the government's incompetence. And I think the real issue--I mean, Iran clearly understood, Britain is going through a transition. Blair has to hand over to Gordon Brown early--in the next few months. And, actually, you know, we're talking here about major transitions in Western democracies, and I think, you know, a lot of these states--I mean, whether it's the Taliban, whether it's Iran, are going to exploit this.

You've got the change-over coming in Washington with the elections coming up in America. You've got Tony Blair handing over to Gordon Brown and then an election coming up in which probably the Labor Party is going to lose. You've got the elections in France coming up, which are probably the most important elections since the Second World War and the most hotly contested elections. So you've got this generation of politicians in the West who were there for 9/11, who were there in the first years of the war on terrorism and who are now leaving the stage. And you've got a new lot of people coming in, and it's a very fragile time for the West, and it's a time when extremists will take advantage of this.

For example, we just had this instance between the Taliban in Italy, where the Taliban arrested this Italian journalist and demanded five Taliban who were being kept prisoner to be released by the Kabul government and President Karzai had to release these five guys because Prime Minister Romano Prodi, the Italian prime minister, telephoned him and said, 'Look, if I don't get this Italian journalist back, my government is going to fall,' and Karzai had no choice because there are 2,000 Italian troops in Afghanistan that he wants to keep, and if the Italian government had fallen, those troops probably would have been withdrawn. So the West, I think, is at this moment of transition incredibly vulnerable to kind of hostage-taking in the broader sense of the word, and you might see more instances of this as you come up to the American elections. As you come up to the French elections where al-Qaeda, the Taliban and other extremist groups take advantage of this kind of fragility.

GROSS: Ahmed Rashid, thank you so much for talking with us. We really appreciate it.

Mr. RASHID: Thank you so much.