The Pakistan Powder Keg

Matthias Gebauer and Charles Hawley - 23/07/2005

Ahmed Rashid, an expert on militant Islam, says unless the West turns up the heat on Musharraf, al-Qaida will continue to flourish there.

The investigation into the July 7 terrorist bombings in London quickly revealed connections to Pakistan. But what role if any did the country run by Gen. Pervez Musharraf play in the attacks? Pakistani journalist and scholar Ahmed Rashid tells us.

Q: After the London bombings, police quickly revealed that most of the bombers were British citizens of Pakistani origin and that they might have traveled to Pakistan to receive instructions and training prior to the July 7 attacks. Was this a surprise to you?

A: People in Pakistan were very apprehensive after the bombing, but the connection with Pakistan did not come as a surprise. It was clear there was a great danger that the Pakistani community in London would carry out such an attack. It is well known that the Muslim community there is very radical -- at least some of them. People also knew many of them had connections in Pakistan.

Q: There have been a number of arrests in Pakistan in recent days. Were the roots of the London attacks in Britain, or were they in Pakistan?

A: The roots of the attack were in England. There has been an enormous radicalization of British Muslims in the last few years and especially since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in the United States. There are radical preachers; there are radical mosques. There are lots of schools there that have been teaching students the Koran on Friday afternoons and at the same time radicalizing them. There is no dearth of ideological training in England.

Q: So how great a role does Pakistan play in international terrorism?

A: Pakistan remains the global center for terrorism and for the remnants of al-Qaida, which is still very strong here. The fact is, after Sept. 11, despite the many crackdowns made by the military regime of Gen. Musharraf, we haven't effectively shut down the Pakistani militant groups. The reason for that is that these groups are very closely tied into the military's foreign policy, especially with respect to Kashmir and Afghanistan. The militant groups here have not been crushed, and if the madrassas they control -- they all control a certain number of such religious schools -- are not shut down, we're not going to see an end to militancy here.

Q: So in other words, despite Musharraf's claims to be combating terrorism -- claims that he repeated in his speech to Pakistan on Thursday evening -- he is not doing enough. Is that what you are saying?

A: When crackdowns do occur, they aren't effective. Three hundred, or even 2,000, people are picked up; they're held for 90 days, and then they are freed as soon as the attention and pressure from the West has stopped. There has never been an organized campaign to combat it. It has never taken place.

Q: In his speech, Musharraf spoke quite a bit about the July 7 bombings in London. What was the main message he was trying to communicate to his nation?

A: His main message was a very positive one. He said we must combat extremism and launch a jihad against radicalism. He asked that people mobilize and not vote for extremists and so on. But there has been no shortage of such speeches. The main question is whether they will be followed by any meaningful action.

Q: Musharraf also emphasized that the London bombers were born and raised in England, as though he were trying to take the blame off of Pakistan. Do you think that's what he was trying to say?

A: The message was that you don't need to come to Pakistan to become a fanatic. You can become a fanatic in Yorkshire, in Leeds or anywhere in England because there's enough extremism there too. That's what he was alluding to.

Q: You mentioned before that there is a lot of work to do in Pakistan when it comes to cracking down on extremism. But what can the West do to keep up pressure on the country and on Musharraf to energetically combat fanaticism and terrorism?

A: The biggest mistake the West has made with Pakistan since 9/11 has been the pursuit of private diplomacy. It hasn't been made public. The West should spell out exactly what is expected of Pakistan and the regime. U.S. President George W. Bush, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, they keep praising Pakistan and saying it is doing a great job hunting down al-Qaida and the Taliban, but behind the scenes they are whistling a completely different tune. The West needs to have one policy, which should be in the public domain. Then the Pakistani public would insist that Musharraf fulfill these demands.

Q: But Musharraf is already under great pressure as he tries to walk the fine line between being allied with the West in the war on terror and at the same time having powerful factions in his society that are radicalized and extreme?

A: But that has been the argument for the last four years. The fact is, Musharraf is still here; he is still very much in power and absolutely nothing has been done about extremism. It is clear that Musharraf has a very political agenda. He wants to be reelected in 2007 and he wants to remain in office until 2012. And for that, he needs votes. At the same time, though, he has been trying to be a good partner with the West. But his political agenda takes precedence over any commitments to combating extremism and terrorism. An army general cannot have a political agenda while he is trying to crack down on terror.

Q: One of the reasons the West is not putting too much pressure on Musharraf is that it is afraid of what would happen if he were no longer there. He has been targeted by assassination attempts twice in his own country. What would happen if his government were toppled or if he were killed?

A: I have no doubt that the army would take over again. People are afraid because the country has nuclear weapons and they think the country would fall apart. I don't believe any of that would happen. There would be continuity.

Q: Since the July 7 bombings, there has been lots of focus on the madrassas as breeding grounds for terrorism and radicalism. What role do these religious schools play in Pakistan?

A: The London bombers came to Pakistan, but I don't think they came to attend a madrassa. I think they came here to make contacts with militant groups and possibly to get training. The majority of madrassas in Pakistan -- I would say around 80 percent -- play a traditional role. That means they teach the Koran and then produce mullahs or religious leaders -- just like religious schools in any religion. But in Pakistan, a number of madrassas have been taken over by militant groups, and it has become a sort of badge of honor for the extremists. These madrassas have become recruiting platforms for these extremist groups. But it is difficult to close them down because they are run by the militant groups Musharraf needs for other aspects of his foreign policy.

Q: It is suspected that Osama bin Laden is on the run or hiding somewhere in Pakistan. What role does he currently play in international terrorism?

A: He is on the run. His main priority at the moment is to stay alive. At the most, he may be able to provide some strategic directives through his support group. But he's not in a position to run day-to-day operations.

Q: Some say that he is in Pakistan and that the Pakistani secret services know where he is and could catch him, but they are not willing to.

A: He is certainly in Pakistan because Pakistan has traditionally had the best infrastructure for al-Qaida. I don't think the Pakistani military knows where he is, but they aren't looking very hard, either, because they fear the military support they get from the United States would disappear as soon as bin Laden is caught.

Q: Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was recently in Washington, and Bush promised closer cooperation with India -- even support for India's civil nuclear program. What does that mean for Pakistan?

A: The biggest fear of the Pakistani military is the new American relationship with India. The fact that the Americans are even willing to work with India's nuclear program now -- something they would never do with Pakistan -- makes the military very nervous. They want to keep the Americans on-board, but the Pakistanis know that the long-term interests of the United States lie with India. The goal of the Pakistani military is to keep the Americans on its side for as long as possible.

Q: Where do you see Pakistan in 10 years?

A: The country has a lot of potential and there is a democratic force here. But the main powers in the country at the moment are without a doubt the military and the fundamentalists.