

Karzai's Scribe - Ahmed Rashid's War

Saturday 31 October 2009, by [ALI Tariq](#) (Date first published: 9 October 2009).

After breakfast, I read Gideon Rachman's often revealing blog on the *Financial Times* website. Today there was some very good news. Ahmed Rashid, a leading adviser to the US hawks on Afghanistan, is depressed. Deconstructing Rachman on this occasion might be useful for CounterPunch readers:

"...Jon Snow of Channel 4 News, allowed me to gatecrash a breakfast he was having with Ahmed Rashid. In theory, Ahmed is just a journalist like us. But his views on Afghanistan and Pakistan are now so widely sought that he has really become a player. He seems to be consulted by everybody - and I mean, everybody."

This last is a slight exaggeration. The main people who consult Rashid, apart from Robert Silvers at the *New York Review of Books*, are US policy-makers in favor of a continuous occupation of Afghanistan. Rashid provides them with many a spurious argument to send more troops and wipe out the Pashtuns opposing the occupation. Within Afghanistan, Rashid's principal backer and friend is Hamid Karzai who has now managed to antagonize even the tamest US liberals such as Peter Galbraith, recently sacked as a UN honcho in Kabul because he suggested that Karzai had rigged the elections. Rashid the journalist has no time for people who suggest that Karzai is a corrupt rogue, whose family is now the richest in the country, or that he manipulates US public opinion with the aid of PR companies, friends in Washington and, of course, Ahmed Rashid himself.

Back to the Rachman blog:

"So it was worrying to find Ahmed in a distinctly depressed mood. The last time I saw him was back in April at the Nato summit in Strasbourg, when he was feeling a bit cheerier. He had been impressed by the Obama administration's decision to put more troops into Afghanistan, and cheered by the Pakistani military's apparent willingness to take on the Pakistani Taliban in the Swat valley. But now, he is seriously worried that the Americans are having cold feet and will step back - and that Pakistan itself will be destabilized by a resurgence of the Afghan Taliban."

It's astonishing to me why neither Snow nor Rachman, both intelligent journalists, did not question Rashid on what are the real problems confronting Pakistan and whether killing people is the only solution? Rashid is committed to the current corrupt regime led by Asif Zardari who together with his cronies and henchmen does the bidding of the US Embassy in Islamabad without questioning any instruction.

The US Viceroy in Pakistan, Anne Patterson (earlier posting: Colombia) can be disarmingly frank. Earlier this year, she offered a mid-term assessment to a visiting Euro-intelligence chief. While Musharraf had been unreliable, saying one thing in Washington and doing its opposite back home, Zardari was perfect: 'He does everything we ask.'

What is disturbing here is not Patterson's candor, but her total lack of judgment. Zardari may be a willing creature of Washington, but the intense hatred for him in Pakistan is not confined to his political opponents. He is despised principally because of his venality. He has carried on from where he left off as minister of investment in his late wife's second government. Within weeks of occupying President's House, his minions were ringing the country's top businessmen, demanding a share of

their profits.

Take the case of Mr X, who owns one of the country's largest banks. He got a call. Apparently the president wanted to know why his bank had sacked a PPP member soon after Benazir Bhutto's fall in the late 1990s. X said he would find out and let them know. It emerged that the sacked clerk had been caught with his fingers literally in the till. President's House was informed. The explanation was rejected. The banker was told that the clerk had been victimized for political reasons. The man had to be reinstated and his salary over the last 18 years paid in full together with the interest due. The PPP had also to be compensated and would expect a cheque (the sum was specified) soon. Where the president leads, his retainers follow. Many members of the cabinet and their progeny are busy milking businessmen and foreign companies.

'If they can do it, so can we' is a widely expressed view in Karachi, the country's largest city. Muggings, burglaries, murders, many of them part of protection rackets linked to politicians, have made it the Naples of the East. A complete failure by the venal Pakistan elite to educate and provide a social safety net for its citizens makes it easier for religious extremists who remain a tiny minority but gain ground because of the war in neighboring Afghanistan. Rachman writes:

"Personally, I have been having cold feet myself and wondering whether the West should pull out of a losing battle in Afghanistan. But Rashid paints a hair-raising picture of what would happen if the US stepped away. He foresees a renewed civil war in Afghanistan, with the Afghan Taliban backed by the Pakistani army, battling it out with the forces of Karzai and the Northern Alliance, backed by Iran. Taking a step further back, the Chinese would be standing in the Afghan-Pakistani-Talib corner, while the Indians backed the other side. The Pakistanis meanwhile would find themselves suffering from the Taliban blowback, caused by the very Afghan war they were sponsoring. It doesn't sound great. But how long is Nato prepared to stay in the ring?"

I'm glad that Rachman has been getting cold feet. He's not alone. The picture Rashid paints is deliberately alarmist and based largely on fantasy; throwing in China is crude but designed to appeal to the revanchists in the Pentagon. Rashid does need help. How can the West cure poor Ahmed's depression? He would recover rapidly if the US remained permanently in Afghanistan and took over Pakistan as well but that would require half-a-million US troops and the killing of a million or more Af-Paks. It's a heavy price to pay for making Rashid feel better. A simpler route might be to get Zardari to give him a big job, failing which, he could move to the UN since Galbraith's job is vacant. I remember Rashid in the old days being extremely sceptical when, after attending a conference in the Soviet Union in 1985, I told him that Gorbachev was going to pull out all Russian troops within a few years. He found that, too, difficult to believe and was, no doubt, equally depressed.

Some of us have been arguing for many years that more troops and more Afghan deaths is totally counter-productive. An exit strategy that involves Iran, Russia and China as well as Pakistan and a national coalition in Afghanistan is the only medium-term solution. Washington has been negotiating privately with the Pashtun resistance and the neo-Taliban have made it clear that once a NATO withdrawal began they would work with other groups and participate in a national government.

Meanwhile the war continues and Afghans and NATO soldiers continue to die. All one can offer them is Kipling's advice to British soldiers (including Winston Churchill) who were battling the Pashtuns in the late 19th century:

*When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains,
And the women come to cut out what remains,
Just roll to your rifle, and blow out your brains.
And go to your God like a soldier.*

P.S.

* From CounterPunch, Weekend Edition, October 9-11, 2009.

* Tariq Ali's latest book, *The Protocols of the Elders of Sodom and other Essays*, has just been published by Verso.