

FEATURE STORY

Al-Qaeda regrouping in Pakistan: Jalali (Interview)

NEW YORK, Dec 31
(Pajhwok Afghan News)

Ali Ahmed Jalali, the former Interior Minister of Afghanistan, who is widely speculated that he would be given some important assignment in the Afghan government, believes that Pakistan has gradually become a center of Al Qaeda web.

Jalali at present is a distinguished professor at the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies of the National Defense University in Washington. He feels that the assassination of Benazir Bhutto can inspire and encourage militants in Afghanistan to intensify their violence, especially if no major steps are taken by Pakistan to stop and reverse the spread of extremism. He also believes end of the sixth year of the U.S.-led military invasion, Afghanistan is facing the worst crisis since the ouster of the Taliban in 2001.

Following are excerpts from an exclusive interview with Pajhwok Afghan News.

PAN: What was your initial reaction when you heard about assassination of Ms Bhutto?

Jalali: Benazir Bhuttos loss is devastating not only for Pakistan but also for a region that suffers from instability and violence fueled by religious extremism and militancy. Bhutto was strongly committed to fight the threat in her country through restoration of democracy that could foster the empowerment of moderate forces. Bhuttos death, therefore, is a serious blow to democracy and moderation in Pakistan with rippling impact in the region and beyond.

The use of religious militancy as an instrument of foreign policy by Pakistani military regimes in the recent past has helped the rise of extremism and entrenchment of trans-national terrorist groups in Pakistan. Talibanization of Pakistani tribal areas is a dangerous outcome of the ill-fated policy. Further, Pakistan has gradually become a center of the al-Qaeda web that radiated out to the Middle East, North Africa and Europe. I hope the tragic loss of Bhutto will finally strengthen the determination of Pakistan government to act decisively against the militants and enlist the political weight of moderate forces in the struggle through democratic changes.

PAN: What impact would it have on the war against terror in Afghanistan?

Jalali: Afghanistan is part of the region afflicted by terrorism and extremist violence. As an immediate result, the assassination of Bhutto can inspire and encourage militants in Afghanistan to intensify their violence, especially if no major steps are taken by Pakistan to stop and reverse the spread of extremism. In the long term, the situation can impact Afghanistan in different ways, depending on Pakistani governments anti-militant policy and its military response to Bhuttos assassination. Close cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan, backed by the international community, can go a long way in defeating terrorism and extremism in the region. It will eventually lead to the defeat of insurgent forces in Afghanistan since few insurgencies in the past have survived without safe haven abroad. As long as the insurgents maintain sanctuary in Pakistan it will be hard to defeat them in Afghanistan.

However, this goal cannot be achieved through business as usual. Winning the confidence of the people is a prerequisite for any effort aimed at defeating the insurgency. This is particularly notable as governments in both countries are losing credibility with the public. So, democratic and political participation by all moderate forces is essential for

winning the campaign. Failure to do this will further aggravate militancy in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

PAN: Who do you find responsible for this terror attack?

Jalali: Pakistani government claims that a leader of pro-Taliban forces in Pakistan carried out the suicide attack. Some supporters of Bhutto dispute the claim. So as the militants did. Pending the outcome of ongoing investigations, one can see the usual footprints of al-Qaeda and its associates in carrying out the assassination. Meanwhile, the controversy over how Bhutto died is likely to further fuel tension in the country, particularly if the tragic event is exploited to introduce emergency measures and other political restrictions in the way of restoration of democracy in Pakistan.

PAN: Despite best of the efforts and the US pumping billions of dollars, it now appears extremism and fundamentalism Al Qaeda and the Taliban have only strengthened their base in the region i.e.; the Afghan-Pak border. How would you explain this phenomenon?

Jalali: Only pumping money is not the answer to rooting out extremism and terrorism in the region. It is the right policy that makes the difference. So far there has been a conspicuous absence of a well-coordinated regional counter-terror policy. In the absence of such a policy fragmented efforts by countries in the region and the United States missed the opportunities to defeat the terrorism in the region. In Pakistan, Washington trusted the military regime of President Musharraf to fight terrorist networks based in its tribal areas. However Pakistan looked at the struggle in the context of its regional interests which were not necessarily in line with those of Washingtons or other partners including Afghanistan. Pakistan has significantly contributed to fighting al-Qaeda militants on its territory. However, it has done little to contain the Taliban and other radical religious groups. The peace deal between the Pakistani government and the pro-Taliban militants in the South and North Waziristan (2005-2006) border area not only led to a major increase in militants' cross-border attacks in Afghanistan but also fostered the Talibanization of tribal areas and renewed entrenchment of al-Qaeda in the region.

In Afghanistan, inadequate deployment of military forces, slow development of state institutions and inefficient use of insufficient funds for reconstruction created a vacuum that was filled either by insurgents or criminal networks. Both led to the disenchantment of the people and loss of confidence in the government. The regional actors who collectively supported the post-Taliban political transition in Afghanistan now hold diverging views. Emerging political changes in the region have strongly influenced the attitude of regional actors including Iran. Internationally, the coalition is divided and does not share a unified vision. Nor have the coalition member states come with the same level of political and military commitment.

PAN: What in your opinion the international community led by the US needs to do in the region, so that long term peace and stability could be achieved in the region, in particular Afghanistan?

Jalali: Responding to ongoing regional challenges requires rebuilding a strong consensus of international and domestic actors for commitment to a shared vision, strategy, implementing mechanisms and processes. Given the compounded political and security situations, this cannot be achieved through traditional methods. Nor do any minor, inconsequential changes save the situation. Major political and strategic shifts both at national and international levels are required now in order to stabilize the region.

PAN: How would you assess the year 2007, as we enter 2008?

Jalali: The end of the sixth year of the U.S.-led military invasion of Afghanistan, finds the country faced with the worst crisis since the ouster of the Taliban in 2001. The main drivers of instability in

Afghanistan include: the insurgency, a chronic weakness of the Afghan government and state institutions, an exploding drug production and a weak economy. At the same time, uncoordinated military operations by international forces and shifting political dynamics in the region are additional contributing factors. These challenges have serious implications for stabilization effort and the process of state building in Afghanistan.

PAN: What is the level of support the Taliban has among the people?

Jalali: The Taliban-led insurgency is not rooted in a popular ideology. The majority of the people in troubled southern provinces do not support the return of the Taliban. And yet, they do not take the risk of challenging the insurgents on behalf of a government that can neither protect them, nor offer services. The insurgents are able to make inroads in rural areas of Afghanistan because the government has lost influence there. This unstable environment is exploited by various spoiling elements, including drug traffickers, alienated tribes, opportunist militia commanders, unemployed youth, criminals and other self-interested spoilers.

PAN: What could be the reasons of popular disenchantment?

Jalali: Frustrated by increasing insecurity and the ineffectiveness of security forces, the government tends to make tactical deals with corrupt non-state power holders and dishonest special-interest groups parties who see instability as being in their interest. This becomes another source of popular disenchantment. The problem will intensify as the nation gets closer to the next presidential election. Political deals, posturing and compromises linked to the electoral contest could upset long-term strategic priorities.

Within the government, an ongoing destructive blame-game, with its attendant accusations, job insecurity and mutual fear, impairs morale and effectiveness. The situation has caused suspicion within the ruling elite and mistrust between the executive and the legislative branches. This lack of trust has also tainted relations between Afghan government and its foreign partners.

PAN: What could be its implications?

Jalali: The perception of impending failure drives domestic interest groups and neighboring countries to hedge their bets. Traditionally, non-state power networks thrive as the central government loses effectiveness. There are signs of revival and rearming of sub-national networks by former militia commanders and local power holders. Moreover, latent and potential spoilers (including non-state power holders and government officials) try to reach out to insurgent elements and their foreign supporters to strike individual deals.

Despite a significant growth of the economy and socio-political developments, increased insecurity and poor governance, have blunted the public mood, even in relatively stable areas. People increasingly lose confidence in the government and hopes for a peaceful future.

Consolidation of the drug economy into an organized network has created a parallel system that provides economic, financial, security, conflict resolution and marketing services to the population. The network functions more effectively than the government. Leveraging poverty, lack of security and the rule of law in the country, the network influences every aspect of political, social and economic life. Such a criminal economy significantly contributes to official corruption, insecurity and the breakdown of the rule of law.

PAN: What could be its regional and international implications?

Jalali: Within the region, doubts about the future of Afghanistan have driven the neighboring countries once again to look for proxies and spheres of political influence in Afghanistan. This is particularly

notable in the attitudes of the governments of Iran and Pakistan. The initial international coalition that was formed to stabilize Afghanistan (including Iran, Russia, and Central Asian countries) has been raven by widening cracks, which impede regional cooperation in fighting terrorism and insurgency in Afghanistan.

PAN: What is the way out?

Jalali: In order for Afghanistan and its international partners to stop and reverse the negative trends listed above, they need to make a thorough and realistic assessment of the situation and adopt a strategic action plan that addresses immediate and long-term human security challenges. As compared to one year ago, there has been a shift towards security as the single most important thing Afghans look for to improve their quality of life. However, security cannot be achieved without an integrated effort to build effective governance, fight the illicit drug trade and defeat the insurgency.

[Back to Top](#)