

“The Duel: Pakistan on the Flight Path of American Power”

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Tariq Ali on “The Duel: Pakistan on the Flight Path of American Power”

Pakistani border troops allegedly foiled a US raid on Pakistani territory Monday. Details of the incident remain unclear, but according to an anonymous Pakistani intelligence official, the troops fired warning shots at American helicopters near the border after US soldiers got out of them and tried to cross into Pakistan. The US military has denied the operation. This follows weeks of strikes by American Predator drone aircrafts and prompted an outcry inside Pakistan. We speak with Tariq Ali, whose new book, *The Duel: Pakistan on the Flight Path of American Power*, takes a new a look at Pakistan and its fraught relationship with the United States. [includes rush transcript]

Guest: Tariq Ali, veteran journalist, commentator and activist. He was born in Lahore, Pakistan and lives in London. He has written over a dozen books, is a frequent contributor to *The Guardian*, *The Nation* and the *London Review of Books* and is on the editorial board of the *New Left Review*. His latest book, just out this month, takes a new a look at Pakistan and its fraught relationship with the United States. It's called *The Duel: Pakistan on the Flight Path of American Power*.

AMY GOODMAN: Pakistani border troops allegedly foiled a US raid on Pakistani territory Monday. Details of the attack remain unclear, but according to an anonymous Pakistani intelligence official, the troops fired warning shots at American helicopters near the border after US soldiers got out of them and tried to cross into Pakistan. The US military has denied the operation.

Earlier this month, US commandos landed helicopter gunships in another Pakistani village and opened fire on a compound, killing twenty people. The commando attack followed weeks of strikes by American Predator drone aircrafts and prompted an outcry inside Pakistan.

Monday's incident comes days after revelations President Bush had signed an order in July authorizing unilateral US strikes and ground operations inside Pakistan.

Pakistan's new president, Asif Ali Zardari, the widower of Benazir Bhutto, is expected to discuss these issues with President Bush when he visits the United States next week. Zardari's Pakistan Peoples Party won elections earlier this month. He hailed his victory earlier as a completion of the democratic process.

PRESIDENT-ELECT ASIF ALI ZARDARI: *I reiterate, parliament is sovereign. This president shall be subservient to the parliament. And I would like history to remember that the weak democracy has managed to take a two-third majority and make a president with a two-third majority, whereas a dictator in uniform could not perform. So, democracy talks, and everybody hears. And to those who would say the Peoples Party or the presidency would be controversial under our guardianship, under*

our stewardship, I would say, "Listen to democracy. 99 percent of the people have spoken."

AMY GOODMAN: Pakistan's new president, Asif Ali Zardari, speaking soon after he won the elections. Zardari vowed to continue the fight against terrorism during his swearing-in ceremony last week.

PRESIDENT-ELECT ASIF ALI ZARDARI: *The government of Pakistan already has a comprehensive plan. And, of course, we bring it the impetus of the people of Pakistan. Yesterday's war may not have had the people behind it, but today's war does have the people of Pakistan. In fact, it has the president of Pakistan, who himself is a victim of terrorism.*

AMY GOODMAN: Meanwhile, the Pakistani military has intensified its offensive against communities near the border, killing at least thirty-two people, including three women, in an attack on Bajaur on Sunday.

My guest today is veteran journalist, commentator, activist, author, Tariq Ali, born in Lahore, Pakistan, lives in London, has written over a dozen books, frequent contributor to *The Guardian* and to *The Nation* and the *London Review of Books*, on the editorial board of the *New Left Review*. His latest book is called *The Duel: Pakistan on the Flight Path of American Power*.

Welcome to Democracy Now!

TARIQ ALI: Very good to be with you, Amy.

AMY GOODMAN: This latest incident, your comments?

TARIQ ALI: Well, I think it's a disastrous situation. For the last year, there's been a big debate within the US administration on whether to strike across the border or not. Many people, not part of the administration, but certainly part of the defense and political establishment, have behind-the-scenes been trying to put pressure on them, saying, "Don't do it." And the reason they've been saying that is because if this becomes a pattern and US tries to have hit-and-run—I mean, hit missions across the Pakistan border, it actually is going to help those people who they claim they are trying to fight.

AMY GOODMAN: How?

TARIQ ALI: In the sense that the Pashtun population of the North-West Frontier Province will say foreigners are now coming into our part of the country and attacking us; we've got to fight them. And they will join, in growing numbers, the movement against the occupation, which already exists now.

AMY GOODMAN: And Senator Obama has made clear that he does believe that the US should engage in unilateral targets if there are high-value targets there that are not being dealt with by the Pakistani government.

TARIQ ALI: I think this was a big mistake that Senator Obama made. He will regret it, because I don't think he was briefed on what the situation in Afghanistan is. You know, historically, every time the US occupiers are cornered in a country, they try and blame the neighboring country—the same in Vietnam when they started bombing Cambodia, saying it was Cambodia's faults. The threats against Iran, even as we speak, and now the missions in Pakistan, the bombing raids in Pakistan, the killing of civilians in Pakistan, when the real crisis and the real problem is a war and an occupation inside Afghanistan which has gone badly wrong.

After all, it's many years, Amy, seven years since 9/11. They have had that country for seven years, and with each passing year, the situation gets worse. They antagonize more and more people who

live in that country, and they are incapable of winning the war. So in order to justify their failure to win the hearts and minds of most Afghan people, they are escalating the war into Pakistan, which is going to make conditions inside the Pakistani military very serious indeed, because there will be real anger.

And this report yesterday that there was a clash between Pakistani military and US helicopters trying to land Marines close to the Pakistan border, I think is probably accurate. The report comes from the Pakistani military; the US is denying it. But it's a very serious situation.

AMY GOODMAN: Your thoughts on the new president, Zardari, the widower of assassinated former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto?

TARIQ ALI: Well, it is slightly entertaining to hear him talking about the enhancement of democracy, when the only reason he's president is (a) that his wife handed over the political party she left to him in her will. I mean, that's how he's become leader of the Peoples Party, that Benazir's will—

AMY GOODMAN: Him and his son.

TARIQ ALI: Him and his son. The son is the real heir, but he is going to be the prince regent and run the country 'til the son comes of age. What has this got to do with democracy?

Secondly, it's well known that he is one of the most corrupt politicians in the country. He grew very rich when Benazir was in power on the first two occasions and amassed enormous wealth. There are corruption charges for money laundering against him in a court in Geneva.

And the picture I wish you'd shown is at his inauguration ceremony, the only other foreign leader he invited was Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan, and they both hugged each other. The twins against terror. But the people now—he is completely in hock, I think, to Cheney and Khalilzad—

AMY GOODMAN: How?

TARIQ ALI: —who put him in power, because they know what he is. They know what he is in terms of his corruption. And he's an obvious creature for them. The notion that he represents Pakistani democracy—if there were direct elections to the presidency, there's no way he would have won. His standing now is on 14 percent.

AMY GOODMAN: He and opposition leader Nawaz Sharif split over the freeing of the—or not returning the barristers and the judges to their positions. Why didn't Zardari support that?

TARIQ ALI: Because Zardari is hostile to the chief justice of the Supreme Court, because this is a very independent-minded chief justice and because the West, which backs Zardari at the moment, is also hostile to that chief justice being put back into power. I mean, Amy, do you know what happened? That this chief justice, when a woman said, "My—

AMY GOODMAN: Iftikhar Chaudhry.

TARIQ ALI: —Iftikhar Chaudhry said, when he was chief justice, a woman approached him, a poor woman, and she said, "My son was disappeared. I don't know where he is. No one tells me." This chief justice of the Supreme Court summoned the head of the Federal Intelligence Agency before the court and said, "Where is this guy?" The Federal Intelligence Agency chief said, "We have no idea what you're talking about." And the chief justice said, "Either you produce this prisoner before me within forty-eight hours, or you go to prison." Language like this has never been heard in the

Pakistan Supreme Court or any other. Within forty-eight hours, the guy was produced. He said, "What's the evidence against him?" No evidence; it's just that the US and Britain had wanted him arrested. So he ordered his release.

AMY GOODMAN: How did Zardari become president, if he only had something like 14 percent support?

TARIQ ALI: Because elections to the presidency are indirect. It's the sitting parliament and the provincial assemblies which elect the president. His party had won those elections on the heels of Benazir's assassination. But the minute it became clear that Zardari was up to his old tricks, not restoring the judiciary, all the opinion polls showed a very rapid decline.

AMY GOODMAN: Who would win if there were direct elections?

TARIQ ALI: Well, I think that if there were direct elections and Zardari were challenged by the chief justice, Iftikhar Chaudhry, there is no doubt in my mind that Iftikhar Chaudhry would sweep to power. Or Nawaz Sharif.

AMY GOODMAN: You write—your book is called *The Duel: Pakistan on the Flight Path of American Power*. Why *The Duel*?

TARIQ ALI: The duel is a long struggle which has been waged by the people of this country, nearly 200 million of them, against a corrupt political elite backed by the military and the United States now for over fifty years. They have been struggling for basic sort of necessities of life: health, education, food to eat. And every time they have been frustrated, either by military coups backed by the United States or by corrupt political elites, of which Zardari is a prime example.

This is the most callous, uncaring elite you have in Pakistan today; they don't care about the people. Human life is cheap. A figure I quote in this book, a UN statistic, that a majority of children born in Pakistan today are being born stunted because of malnutrition. Now, this, for me, is a horrific figure. And no government under the sun in that country has ever cared for the needs of the people or done much for them. And that is the duel which goes on. And the surprise is that more poor people don't turn to religious extremism. It would be comprehensible, but they don't do it.

AMY GOODMAN: Where is Musharraf now?

TARIQ ALI: I think Musharraf is—you know, lives in the house provided, heavily guarded by the military. And my own feeling is that soon he'll start traveling abroad. His family lives in New York. He's got a brother—a very good guy, actually—a doctor in Chicago. But I think his—you know, he has no future in Pakistani politics.

AMY GOODMAN: Billions lost, US billions, in Pakistan, as the—under Musharraf. This will continue under Zardari? Where does that money go? Who is it shoring up?

TARIQ ALI: Well, this is always—you know, exactly how they launder this money is not known to me, but the money always disappears. And this has been the case with the money provided by the West to this elite for a long, long time. I don't think it will be too different with Zardari.

AMY GOODMAN: You've also written extensively about Latin America. I want to ask you about the crisis in Bolivia right now. Emergency summit in Chile, all of the Latin American leaders supporting Evo Morales. He expels the US ambassador, Goldberg, from Bolivia, saying he is part of those who are trying to push him out.

TARIQ ALI: Look, the situation in Bolivia, where I was last year, is very simple. You have an overwhelming majority of the population supporting, voting for Evo Morales, voting for his referendums, wanting a new constitution. And you have a tiny Creole, i.e. white, a privileged elite who can't bear the thought that an Indian has got elected, a native of that country is elected president and is trying to carry out his electoral promises. So they've tried to topple him. They're saying they won't listen. They've got mercenaries in from neighboring countries, and they do have the backing of the United States. So, what Evo Morales has done is totally understandable. But what is also more interesting, Amy, that we were constantly being told by the upmarket press, *The Economist*, *New York Times*, etc., that what you have in Latin America is a situation where we have moderates, like Lula and Bachelet in Chile, and hardliners, like Chavez and Morales. Well, the United States has now united them all. Bachelet has attacked what is going on in Bolivia. Lula has attacked what is going on in Bolivia. So these extremist terror actions inside Bolivia have united virtually the whole of Latin America, with the exception, of course, of Colombia.

AMY GOODMAN: And the coup? Could there be a coup that removes Morales?

TARIQ ALI: Well, if there is a coup in Bolivia that removes Morales, you then have a situation of possible civil war, because the people will not tolerate their democratically elected president being removed by a coup.

AMY GOODMAN: We're going to leave it there, but I hope we have part two this week. *The Duel: Pakistan on the Flight Path of American Power*, that is Tariq Ali's latest book, veteran journalist, commentator, author, born in Lahore, Pakistan, works out of London.

P.S.

* From Democracy Now!

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