

As 250 Killed in Clashes Near Afghan Border, British-Pakistani Author Tariq Ali on Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Ongoing U.S. Role in Regional Turmoil

Wednesday 5 December 2007, by [ALI Tariq](#), [GOODMAN Amy](#) (Date first published: 10 October 2007).

The acclaimed British-Pakistani historian, novelist, political campaigner and commentator Tariq Ali joins us with his analysis of the latest from Pakistan. Days after General Pervez Musharraf's re-election in a boycotted contest, at least 250 people have been killed in clashes along the Afghan border. Musharraf and his policies have generated a maelstrom of opposition from a broad spectrum of the Pakistani population. [includes rush transcript]

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Pakistan's military ruler and key US ally, Pervez Musharraf, swept most of the votes in Saturday's presidential election, which was boycotted by the opposition. Eight years after seizing power in a coup, General Musharraf might have won the votes, but his victory is not yet complete. He has to wait until the Supreme Court confirms the legality of his re-election bid, given that he is still the army chief.

If his election is confirmed, General Musharraf has promised to shed his military uniform, transition to civilian rule, and, in a US-brokered deal, share power with the exiled former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. But General Musharraf and his policies have generated a maelstrom of opposition from a broad spectrum of the Pakistani population. Tariq Ali was in Pakistan this summer and joins me now in the firehouse studio in New York.

Tariq Ali. Acclaimed British-Pakistani historian, novelist, political campaigner and commentator. He is one of the editors of the *New Left Review* and the author of a dozen books on South Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, Islamic history, empire, and resistance. His story of the 1979 coup in Pakistan was published last year and the stage adaptation opens next week in New York. It's called "The Leopard and the Fox: A Pakistani Tragedy."

RUSH TRANSCRIPT

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In his election, if it's confirmed, General Musharraf has promised to shed his military uniform, transition to civilian rule, and, in a US-brokered deal, share power with the exiled former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. But General Musharraf and his policies have generated a maelstrom of opposition from a broad spectrum of the Pakistani population. He acknowledged his precarious base of support in a speech after Saturday's election.

GEN. PERVEZ MUSHARRAF: *And in the end, I have appealed to the nation towards a conciliatory approach, and I have appealed to the—first of all, the nation, the people of Pakistan, not to join or reject any calls for strikes and agitational activity. I have appealed to the lawyers to have—let sanity prevail. They are all educated people, and I hope, in the—for justice and for peace, they adopt an approach of Pakistan comes first. On the media, I have asked the media to give the positives, to adopt a balanced approach. I'm the greatest supporter of their independence and give a confidence—a feeling of confidence, a feeling of feeling good attitude to be developed, mindset to be developed, within the people of Pakistan. And I've also extended a conciliatory approach to all the opposition parties. This is what I've done. Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen.*

AMY GOODMAN: That's Pervez Musharraf. Prominent journalist from Aaj TV, Talat Hussain, was skeptical of the election. The Aaj TV station in Karachi was brutally attacked by pro-Musharraf forces in May after they broadcast footage of violence against Musharraf's critics.

TALAT HUSSAIN: *Well, clearly, President Musharraf has done the trick. He has been able to fool everybody, particularly the opposition, and has been able to get his candidature approved. His only hurdle now seems to be that of the Supreme Court hearing that will start from the 17th. Other than that, he has had a very smooth sailing, and all the opposition claims that they will be able to counter him and scuttle him have fallen on stony ground.*

AMY GOODMAN: A few days before the election, former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and Supreme Court lawyer for the opposition Hamid Khan expressed their deep reservations about General Musharraf's standing for re-election while still army chief. The clip begins with the former Prime Minister Bhutto speaking as the leader of the Pakistan People's Party, or the PPP.

BENAZIR BHUTTO: *As far as we in the PPP are concerned, we believe that if we had voted for a uniformed president, we would be legitimizing it. But, as I said, we are unable to vote for General*

Musharraf, and he understands this, because PPP stands for democracy, and democracy means a distinction between civilian and military. And since General Musharraf continues to be chief of army staff, we will not be voting for him, but we will also not be resigning.

HAMID KHAN: *And we have taken the position that he is disqualified under Article 63 of the Constitution, because he is holding two offices at the same time. We have also said that he's not qualified for the reason that he is not honest, he is not a person who can be relied upon, because he has gone back on his word previously when he made a statement and a solemn promise to the nation that he will take his uniform by 31st of December, 2004, and he went back on it.*

AMY GOODMAN: Tariq Ali is an acclaimed British-Pakistani historian, novelist, political campaigner and commentator, one of the editors of the New Left Review and the author of a dozen books on South Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, Islamic history, empire and resistance. His book on the 1979 military coup in Pakistan has been adapted for the stage and opens in New York next week. It's called *The Leopard and the Fox: A Pakistani Tragedy*. Tariq Ali was in Pakistan this summer, joins us from our firehouse studios. Welcome to Democracy Now!

TARIQ ALI: Hi, Amy.

AMY GOODMAN: Tell us about the situation right now, this bombing along the border, the villages bordering Afghanistan.

TARIQ ALI: Well, the situation is very critical. Musharraf is incredibly unpopular at home now. Benazir is being savagely attacked by some of her own supporters for doing a deal with him under State Department pressure. And General Naseerullah Babar, who was her Interior Minister, has just publicly resigned from the party against the deal. So the situation politically is very volatile.

On the western borders of Pakistan, there's a continuing war being waged, and Musharraf has antagonized the local population by being over-keen to carry out these bombing raids. These bombing raids are tied to the situation in Afghanistan. And what is going on in Afghanistan is that the actions of NATO and especially US bombing raids, which have killed lots and lots of innocent civilians, have now sent people in the direction of the Taliban, which is increasingly becoming an umbrella for the resistance to the NATO occupation and is being revived as a major political force. This then spills over into Pakistan, because it's a very long porous border. There is no way anyone can control it. You can't have barbed wire, you can't build a wall.

And so, the solution to the situation in Waziristan lies in Afghanistan, and we need a peace settlement there as soon as possible and the withdrawal of foreign troops.

AMY GOODMAN: What about Taliban in Afghanistan?

TARIQ ALI: The Taliban in Afghanistan have cleaned up their act a bit. They appear publicly. They talk on television. And the situation has got so bad for the Karzai government in Afghanistan that they have openly sent peace feelers to the Taliban. Secret negotiations have taken place, and the Taliban have said they are prepared to join Karzai and the US-led government in Kabul, provided all foreign troops are withdrawn .

Well, Karzai refuses to do that, because without foreign troops his rule wouldn't last more than forty-eight hours. But the fact that they are negotiating with the Taliban is in itself interesting and shows that basically they have not been able to defeat the Taliban, far from it, and that they've—the situation in Afghanistan is now completely out of control.

AMY GOODMAN: Where does bin Laden fit into this picture?

TARIQ ALI: Well, bin Laden clearly is not going to support any deal with the Taliban, but he doesn't control the Taliban. The tiny faction of the Taliban which supported him is largely being marginalized and works independently. But the Taliban, as an organization, is now negotiating, talking to the Pakistan government, talking to Karzai, clearly with Western approval. So we now have the ironical situation that because the United States is very keen to isolate Iran, and Iran is a central player in Afghanistan, they're prepared to do deals with almost anyone.

AMY GOODMAN: Can you talk about the whole issue of how Pervez Musharraf came to power? I mean, he has been seen extremely favorably by the US media for a long time.

TARIQ ALI: Well, I mean, Amy, we've had in Pakistan now, increasingly over the last sixty years—Pakistan was sixty this year—you have a cycle of civilian rule, attempts at democracy, military takeover, civilian rule, military takeover, and the military has now ruled Pakistan for most of its life. Most military dictators in Pakistan have a life cycle, a political life cycle, of ten to eleven years. Musharraf is reaching his ninth year. His popularity is completely gone. When you watch him, as even we saw in the clips you showed, this is a guy—you see power draining away from him. He doesn't speak with the same confidence that he used to when he first came to power in 1999.

And he promised then a whole reform program to transform and modernize the country; nothing has been done. He promised that corrupt politicians would be tried in court. Benazir, of course, wasn't in the country and didn't come back, because the charges of corruption against her were very strong. Nawaz Sharif was allowed to leave Pakistan under a deal. And Musharraf then did a deal with another group of extremely corrupt politicians who are his main cronies today. So the regime is discredited.

Then he decides to take on the chief justice of the Supreme Court and sacks him. That triggers off one of the most remarkable civil society movements we've seen in the country, nothing to do with religion, nothing to do with money, a constitutional demand for the separation of powers and an independent judiciary, a movement which becomes so strong that Musharraf has to move back and the chief justice is reinstated.

At the same time, you have the jihadi elements inside Pakistan holed up in a mosque from January this year. An action is taken finally in July. And the question people are asking is, the military intelligence saw this mosque being transformed into an arsenal; why didn't they act earlier?

So Musharraf has basically failed to achieve any of the things he said he was going to achieve in Pakistan, and you have an awful situation where you have a corrupt and callous elite, which doesn't care about the conditions of ordinary people. If you go into any part of Pakistan—and I spent six weeks there traveling—and ask them, "What are your main needs?" most poor people will tell you, "We want clean water. We want electricity in our villages. We want education for our kids. We want doctors to be able to see us"—elementary basic social needs which people have.

It's not the case that Pakistan is sort of, you know, frothing with religion. This is limited to the Pakistan-Afghan border region. And the image Western media often present is bearded guys skulking in the Hindu Kush Mountains, waiting to take over, and all that stands between a jihadi finger on the nuclear trigger is General Musharraf and now Benazir Bhutto perched on his shoulder. This is not going to do the trick.

AMY GOODMAN: We're talking to Tariq Ali, acclaimed British-Pakistani historian, novelist, political commentator. We'll be back with him in a minute.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: Our guest, Tariq Ali, acclaimed British-Pakistani historian, novelist, political campaigner and commentator, one of the editors of *New Left Review* in Britain, wrote a book that's being adapted for stage here in New York called *The Leopard and the Fox: A Pakistani Tragedy*. Explain what that is about.

TARIQ ALI: Well, that is an account of the previous military dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq, which was a hardcore Islamist military dictatorship during the war against the Russians in Afghanistan. And soon after General Zia took over, the elected prime minister of the country, Benazir's father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was arrested, charged with a completely bogus offense of murder. A trial was rigged. A Supreme Court was pressured. And the US gave the green light for him to be hanged.

And this story was—the BBC commissioned me to write a series of three plays based on it. And when the plays were written, they approved them and had started casting the plays. This is—this would be now in the early '80s. And finally, there was pressure from the top, and the BBC said, "Could you take out all links?" They said informally—they sent an emissary to me, Mark Tully, the head in South Asia, and they sent an emissary to me to say, "If you took out all reference to the US being involved in the coup, we would put these plays on." And I said, "No, I'm not going to take out any references to this at all." So they said, "You'd rather the plays weren't done?" I said, "I'm not going to accept censorship." So the plays were never done.

And it's just—they've just been published as a book with the account of how the BBC operated and the BBC lawyer's letters. I mean, the BBC lawyer finally said to me, "This is not political censorship. General Zia could sue us." So I said, "The number of plays you do by the Soviet Polit Bureau or the Eastern Europeans." And the lawyer said, "Do you think a British court would award damages to a Soviet Polit Bureau?" And I said, "Do you think a British court would award damages to a squalid third-world military dictator?" at which point the discussion ended, and the plays weren't done.

And I think, you know, a group of young people in New York, a theater group, have decided to do a—I think they've been inspired by the book—it isn't a real adaptation—to do a version of it now at this date.

AMY GOODMAN: Explain who Benazir Bhutto's father was.

TARIQ ALI: Benazir Bhutto's father was Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the founder of the Pakistan People's Party, a party which was originally founded because in the late '60s, in November '68, you had a giant movement against the military, a insurrection, which carried on for three whole months, uniting workers and students and peasants. Many of the students were killed. But, finally, the movement was triumphant, and the dictator was overthrown, and the country had to have its first general election.

And the politician who won in what is now Pakistan was Benazir's dad, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who pledged—his big slogan was food, clothing and shelter for the poor, massive social reforms, massive land reforms. He could have changed the face of Pakistan, had he so wanted, because the military was completely weak by then. But, in fact, he pledged all these things and did nothing. And so, when the military captured him, Henry Kissinger said to him, "Unless you desist on the nuclear question, we're going to make a horrible example out of you." And he didn't, and so they made a horrible example out of him. He was executed.

AMY GOODMAN: And how did Benazir Bhutto, his daughter, rise to power?

TARIQ ALI: Benazir Bhutto was, in those days, not very political, but her father's martyrdom, so to

speaking, brought her into politics. I remember talking to her when her father was prime minister of Pakistan, and she would say to me, "Oh, you know, he's putting me under pressure to come into politics. I don't want to be a politician. I want to be a diplomat. I want to be in the foreign office." But once her father was killed by the army, she and her mother were very courageous. They took the military on. They were locked up. They were in and out of prison. So her role at that time was very honorable.

The big problems began when she—after General Zia was blown up in a plane with the US ambassador, there were elections again, and Benazir won. But she was unable to do anything the first time. And the second time she came to power, her government was incredibly corrupt, and the military then, when Musharraf came to power, charged her with corruption. The evidence is there; it's irrefutable. And as part of the deal now, this corruption is being ignored, which is making people incredibly cynical.

AMY GOODMAN: Tariq Ali, I wanted to play a clip of the Democratic presidential hopeful, Senator Barack Obama, saying two months ago that he would attack areas in Pakistan with or without approval of the Pakistani government.

SEN. BARACK OBAMA: *I understand that President Musharraf has his own challenges, but let me make this clear. There are terrorists holed up in those mountains who murdered 3,000 Americans. They are plotting to strike again. It was a terrible mistake to fail to act when we had a chance to take out an al-Qaeda leadership meeting in 2005. If we have actionable intelligence about high-value terrorist targets, and President Musharraf will not act, we will.*

AMY GOODMAN: That's Barack Obama. Tariq Ali?

TARIQ ALI: Well, I mean, what is quite staggering is that Barack Obama, whose ignorance on world politics is well known, using this issue in Pakistan to try and strike a military pose, I mean, it's utterly grotesque and pathetic. Were the United States to start bombing raids inside Pakistan, there would be a massive increase of support for the jihadi fundamentalist groups in that country, and it would weaken not just secular political groups, it would weaken even the moderate religious parties who are not associated with that. So this sort of rhetoric coming from Obama is incredibly provocative.

I remember once when I was in the United States just before Bush got reelected and watching—I was in Illinois watching Barack Obama say on television that were Bush to decide to take out the Iranian nuclear reactor, he would be in total support of it. So if this is what Democratic candidates are talking like, Amy, it is quite a depressing situation.

AMY GOODMAN: Right now, the situation in Pakistan, where does Bush's allegiance lie, and what could you see happening?

TARIQ ALI: Well, I think Bush's allegiance lies to the military ruler of Pakistan. They've made that very clear. They've given him \$10 billion. Every time the Pakistani military goes in and carries out actions on the Afghan border, they send an invoice directly to Centcom in Florida, which pays them directly. So all these actions are being paid for by the United States, which is well known in Pakistan and is well known here, as well. So the United States is totally tied into the military leader. And the cosmetic changes they're proposing by this arranged marriage, a marriage arranged by the State Department between Musharraf and Benazir Bhutto, a political marriage, I don't think is going to work. It is creating mayhem within her own party. And there's nothing she can do, because she's quite a discredited politician.

AMY GOODMAN: In what way?

TARIQ ALI: In the way that she's—everyone knows that she and her husband went in power incredibly corrupt. The evidence is there. And in a country where the ordinary people are already alienated from the political process, to inflict this on them isn't going to improve matters.

AMY GOODMAN: On this sixth anniversary of the bombing of Afghanistan, I want to go back to that country. Afghan President Hamid Karzai described the limited powers of the Taliban against his government at a White House press conference this August.

PRESIDENT HAMID KARZAI: *The Taliban do pose dangers to our innocent people, to children going to school, to our clergy, to our teachers, to our engineers, to international aid workers. They're not posing any threat to the government of Afghanistan. They're not posing any threat to the institutions of Afghanistan or to the build-up of institutions of Afghanistan. It's a force that's defeated. It's a force that is frustrated.*

AMY GOODMAN: President Karzai. Tariq Ali?

TARIQ ALI: Well, I mean, the same president who is talking like this is now engaged in negotiations with the Taliban, because his own power doesn't extend beyond Kabul. And that's during the daytime. And everyone knows that Afghanistan is in a very unstable situation. And, Amy, one reason for this, one big reason for this, is that when the Taliban were toppled after 9/11, within Afghanistan—one has to be clear about this—there were large numbers of Afghans who were very happy, because they didn't like them, but they were hoping that change would come and there would be a social infrastructure in their country and they would be able to breathe. This never happened. No money was spent on creating institutions for the ordinary Afghan people. Instead, Karzai and his cronies built themselves gigantic villas in the heart of Kabul, just taking land which belonged to anyone else. And while these large villas were being constructed, NATO troops were guarding them. You know, it costs \$5,000—that's all—to build a home for a poor family of four or five people. Very few of these homes were ever built. And so, people began to get completely alienated.

Karzai's brother, his younger brother, Wali Ahmed Karzai, is well known in Afghanistan and Pakistan as one of the largest traders in heroin and gunrunning. It's very, very well-known. And this is a guy who can't control his own brother, and then he has the nerve to come and talk like this in the White House.

AMY GOODMAN: Afghanistan has become the largest poppy provider in the world, base of heroin.

TARIQ ALI: Since the occupation, the DEA figures which have come out show this very clearly, that more heroin, more poppies are now being cultivated in Afghanistan than under the Taliban regime. So this trade is rife, and it's going to wreck that region.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, you spent six weeks in Pakistan, but you live in Britain. I wanted to turn to your new prime minister, Gordon Brown, who has vowed to remove half of Britain's troops in Iraq by next spring. This is part of his announcement in the British Parliament on Monday.

PRIME MINISTER GORDON BROWN: *With the Iraqis already assuming security responsibility, we expect to establish provincial Iraqi corps in Basra province in the next two months, as already announced by the prime minister of Iraq, move to the first stage of overwatch, reduce numbers in southern Iraq from, at the start of September, five-and-a-half thousand to four-and-a-half thousand, immediately after provincial Iraqi control, and then to 4,000. And then in the second stage of overwatch in the spring, and guided as always by advice of military commanders, reduce to around*

two-and-a-half thousand troops, with a further decision about the next phase made then.

AMY GOODMAN: Gordon Brown, your prime minister.

TARIQ ALI: Well, Gordon Brown is basically doing what had been planned for several months, you know, even when Tony Blair was in power, that the British military, senior figures in the British military have not been happy with this engagement in Iraq at all and have said more or less publicly that if in the local area they became more and more isolated, there are more and more attacks on them, they were not going to go to the wall on this one. So this doesn't surprise me at all, Amy. The fact is that Brown should have done what the Spanish government did, which is to withdraw all troops immediately. This is, you know, an attempt to appease the antiwar movement at home, because 70% of Britons are now opposed to the war, like in the United States. But I think these measures are part and parcel of him trying to show that he's different from Blair, whereas in every other way he is carrying on the policies of Blair and is committed as firmly to the United States.

AMY GOODMAN: Finally, where is Blair now?

TARIQ ALI: No one knows. Blair has more or less become an un-person in Britain. Someone who was so dominant is barely talked about. He's disappeared. He's gone. I think the US has given him a job in Jerusalem, pretending to search for peace. But no one talks about him. No one thinks about him. He was in a sort of ephemeral Teflon-type politician. And he has now disappeared. And instead, we've got his old chum in power, who's more or less doing the same things, and is now—his popularity ratings, Brown's popularity ratings, are right down.

AMY GOODMAN: Tariq Ali, I want to thank you for being with us. Welcome back to the United States, acclaimed British-Pakistani historian, novelist, political commentator, one of the editors of the *New Left Review* in Britain.

P.S.

* From Democracy Now:

http://www.democracynow.org/2007/10/10/as_250_killed_in_clashes_near

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