

Afghan Election May Be Undoing U.S. Policy

by Ramtanu Maitra

A new level of insecurity has descended all over Afghanistan since mid-July. A number of factors have converged to create this highly volatile situation; the U.S. policy put in place in the Winter of 2001 is now up for a crucial test.

The new crisis emerged primarily for three reasons. The first was Washington's relentless pressure on Kabul to hold both the presidential and parliamentary elections before the scheduled U.S. Presidential election. Washington's best Afghan ally, Interim President Hamid Karzai, tiptoeing through political and security minefields, managed to get the logistics in place for the presidential elections on Oct. 9. The more important parliamentary elections have been pushed back to Spring 2005. But that has not abated the commitment to violence and disruption by the militants. Recent weeks saw a fresh spate of violence against the aid workers, Afghan army, UN personnel, and U.S. troops in southern, central, and eastern Afghanistan.

The second reason behind the emergence of the new crisis is the overall collapse of law and order in the country. Speaking to the reporters in Kabul on June 20, Jean Arnault, head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), cited a series of sometimes deadly attacks in the past three weeks as evidence that the situation "has become more volatile."

"We are now facing direct attacks with fairly heavy weapons against the office of the electoral process," Arnault said. "This is clearly an attempt at undermining the process, and again it stresses how important it is for the international community to do more in order to assist this process." Finally, the crisis came to a head on July 26, the last day for submitting papers to the Afghan Election Commission for the presidential candidature. For months, Karzai had been pressuring his Ministers—his Defense Minister and Vice-President Gen. Muhammad Qaseem Fahim in particular—to disarm reportedly 50,000-strong militias. Another requirement set for Fahim, and all other Ministers, to be on the ticket, was to give up official posts. General Fahim turned down both requirements. As a result, at the last minute, Karzai dropped Fahim from the ticket and included Ahmed Zia Massoud, brother of slain Tajik-Afghan Commander Ahmed Shah Massoud, Karzai's present envoy to Russia.

Immediately, Karzai's Education Minister and a prominent Tajik-Afghan leader, Younus Qanooni, declared his candidacy, apparently backed by General Fahim. Fahim con-

tinues to function as Defense Minister and maintains his huge militia. Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah has also thrown his support to Younus Qanooni.

Disunity Breaks Open

Qanooni, who, like Fahim and Abdullah, is from the Panjshir Valley, said he enjoys the support of those two as well as the support of Ahmad Shah Massoud's other brother, Ahmad Wali Massoud. The Massouds are also from Panjshir, and the Panjshiri group has played a dominant role in Afghanistan's transitional government. Some observers believe Qanooni might emerge as the most serious contender to Karzai in an election that until recently was widely expected to be an easy victory for Karzai. The strategy of Washington until now has been to show the unity of the major Afghan ethnic groups—Pushtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras. But the only support Karzai could expect to garner at this point is from the Pushtuns. But in that case, Karzai's close association with the United States, and the Taliban Pushtuns' vitriolic reaction to the United States, makes Karzai's candidacy dicey.

In addition to General Fahim, who is considered the most powerful Tajik-Afghan warlord, Karzai would also be opposed by the most powerful Uzbek-Afghan warlord, Abdul Rashid Dostum. After the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001 to "eliminate" the Taliban—who were mostly Pushtun—Dostum and Fahim were the leading lights of the Northern Alliance backing the U.S.-led troops. Karzai, a Pushtun distantly linked to the Afghan nobility, had once supported the Taliban, but later was driven out of Afghanistan by their militia. His appointment as the interim figurehead was an attempt by the U.S. strategists to appease the Pushtuns and create an alliance between the Northern Alliance leaders and the Pushtun leaders, minus the Taliban Pushtuns.

The American strategy was unsustainable to begin with. It was bound to collapse at a certain point in time. It is for this reason that some Afghan observers have responded positively to the July 26 developments. One such observer is Radek Sikorski, a former deputy foreign and defense minister for Poland who is now an analyst on Central Asia at the American Enterprise Institute. On Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Sikorski pointed out that replacing Fahim with Massoud is in many respects politically non-confrontational; Karzai merely replaced the Northern Alliance's operations chief with the brother of its martyred military leader, and one ethnic Tajik with another. "Of course, Massoud's brother doesn't wield any executive power, being a diplomat in Moscow, whereas Fahim does. But it [choosing Massoud over Fahim] could actually increase popular appeal, because Fahim is universally believed to be corrupt," Sikorski said.

Another Afghan expert, Ahmed Rashid of Pakistan, has expressed a similar view in his article in the Pakistan *Daily Times* on July 30. He said Fahim has grown highly unpopular

and has been blamed for blocking institutional reforms and giving protection to warlords. “The decision to drop him could prove to be Karzai’s most momentous move since he accepted the job of interim president in December 2001.”

Karzai’s decision to dump Fahim from his ticket was not entirely his personal decision. Officials from the UN, the European Union and Britain had urged it upon both Karzai and the United States, to de-link Kabul from one of the worst of the Afghan warlords. Observers claim that it was the United States that was preventing Karzai from making this move. Reports indicate that in early July, Karzai and U.S. officials tried to strike a deal with the warlords to include them on his ticket for the elections, without making their disarmament an issue. That plan fell through when blocked by reformists in the Afghan cabinet. U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad, after his recent interview with the Hong Kong-based *Far Eastern Economic Review* (FEER), had expressed his concern that dropping Fahim would increase tensions between Karzai and his rivals. In the FEER interview, however, Khalilzad spoke differently. Only, he said, “if the warlords take part in [the disarmament process] and show a willingness to reform themselves, they can certainly be part of Afghanistan’s future.”

While the basis now exists for all-out ethnic strife leading up to the presidential election, what makes the situation doubly worse is the overall security situation. Security for the already twice-delayed election is not assured. On June 29, the all-party Foreign Affairs Select Committee in the United Kingdom released a report saying, “There is a real danger . . . that Afghanistan—a fragile state in one of the most sensitive and volatile regions of the world—could implode.” The report urged the Blair Government to “impress upon the NATO allies the need to deliver on their promises to help Afghanistan before it is too late.”

NATO’s Utter Failure

What the committee referred to has become a subject of much discussion in recent months. NATO allies of the United States have long promised to send troops to Afghanistan to ensure better security. This has not happened; it is likely that NATO troops sent “to ensure safe and peaceful presidential election” would be insignificant in number. NATO recently decided to increase its forces there from 6,500 to 8,700, which the report claims will be inadequate. The same assessment is made by Col. Philip Wilkinson, who wrote, along with Michael Bhatia and Kevin Lanigan, the recently released report by international scholars of the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU). That report says that Afghanistan now has one member of the military per 1,115 members of the population, compared to one per 50 at an equivalent period in Kosovo, one per 111 in East Timor, one per 161 in Iraq, and one per 375 in Haiti. “NATO’s continued inability to provide significant forces will only further embolden Presi-

dent Karzai’s opponents—whether warlords, poppy-growers or terrorists,” the AREU report concludes. “The Taliban are far from defeated, poppy production has soared, and regional warlords are still brazen in their abuse of citizens and in their dealings with the central government.”

As if to prove that point, the Taliban have been launching two to four attacks a day in southern Afghanistan from their bases in Pakistan. Their main targets have been UN and Afghan election officials. More than 650 people have been killed in Taliban attacks this year, including two dozen civilians attacked simply for carrying voter registration cards. AREU, based in Kabul, puts the blame on the international community for serious neglect, and says that compared with countries where the international community has intervened militarily, Afghanistan has been badly let down. As the situation stands, it is still not possible to hold fair and safe elections, according to AREU Director Andrew Wilder.

Much has been said about the government’s new army, being trained by the United States and France. A tiny force, numbering only 12,000 men, pitched against 60-80,000-strong private militias of Afghan warlords, does not stand much of a chance to hold its own. Interior Minister Ali Jalali says he will have some 30,000 trained policemen on duty—barely enough to cover polling stations in towns, let alone the countryside. Some 17,000 American troops are in the country, tasked primarily in the hunt for High Value Targets (HVTs) such as Osama Bin Laden and Mullah Omar. The Bush Administration believes capturing the HVTs will benefit its re-election.

Poppy And. . . More Poppy

Underlying the security situation is the absolute failure of the Karzai government and the United States to reduce poppy cultivation. Last year, Afghanistan produced about 3,600 tons of opium. This year it would exceed 4,000 tons, one of the largest harvests ever. It is no secret that the Taliban and the warlords have been supported by this booming drugs economy.

The annual UN report shows that Afghanistan is now producing 75% of the world’s illegal supplies of opium. The survey shows a continuing decline in poppy cultivation in Southeast Asia, but production in Afghanistan has increased to fill the gap. The massive opium crop has not only created an extremely unstable security situation, but strengthened the warlords who are using the opium-generated cash to recruit more militia.

On July 26, minutes before the deadline to nominate candidates, Karzai announced his decision to drop the first vice-president, General Fahim, from his election ticket. Days before the announcement, he had given his reason in an interview: “Warlord militias are a bigger problem than the Taliban because militias are undermining the institutional build-up of Afghanistan. Militia armies are posing a great threat to that, and we have to address and resolve it.”