

Unchanging Afghanistan; Whither Karzai?

by Ramtanu Maitra

Afghanistan's beleaguered interim President Hamid Karzai was a guest at the June 8-10 Group of Eight summit at Sea Island, Georgia. Before that, he was at Fort Drum, New York to thank the 10th Mountain Division for their help in Afghanistan. President Karzai, the Bush Administration's man-in-Kabul entrusted with the unenviable task of ushering in democracy in Afghanistan, is now a prisoner of the United States. He is surrounded by American bodyguards. He cannot step outside of his palace in Kabul, because the militia maintained by his Cabinet ministers may assassinate him. Similarly, the exact dates of his U.S. visit were not released.

Nonetheless, he has an important task to accomplish in the United States during his meeting with President Bush. Washington had long been pressuring him to hold the Presidential and parliamentary elections before the U.S. Presidential election is held on Nov. 2. Washington picked September as the month when Karzai should hold elections. Karzai tried to convince U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell otherwise last March, when he was in Kabul. But, Washington is unrelenting. What is good for Bush's re-election has got to be good for Karzai, the litany goes.

So, President Karzai was in Washington seeking \$100 million-odd to hold the elections; complaining about the security situation inside Afghanistan; brushing deftly over the warlordism and opium explosion; and urging President Bush to press Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf, America's strategic ally on the war against terrorism, not to unleash al-Qaeda and Taliban militants inside Afghanistan to scuttle the hoped-for Afghan elections. It was certain that President Karzai would be promised whatever he would ask. But it is a foregone conclusion that the ground situation will remain unchanged in Afghanistan for years to come.

But President Karzai would do well to discuss with President Bush how to deal with the possible unraveling of the prisoner abuse scandal in Afghanistan. Facing pressure to open its secretive jails to outside scrutiny, the U.S. military said on June 9 it will allow the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to visit about 20 jails where the Americans are holding nearly 400 prisoners. The U.S. military has so far refused to allow Afghanistan's human rights commission into any of the prisons in the country.

The prisoner abuse scandal in Iraq has focussed more attention on long-standing allegations of detainee mistreatment by the U.S. military in Afghanistan, including claims of



The dates of Afghan President Hamid Karzai's June 6-8 trip to the United States had to be kept secret until he embarked, so shaky is his position relative to warlords who still hold sway in the provinces and in his cabinet.

beatings, hooding, and sexual abuse. U.S. investigations are under way into at least three deaths in custody: two homicides caused by “blunt force injuries” at the U.S.-held Bagram Air Base in December 2002; and another detainee death in eastern Afghanistan in June 2003.

Election Preparations

Before he planned to come to the United States, President Karzai had done his homework. He has “opened” voter registration centers in all 34 provinces. It is another matter, that only 3 million of the 10 million Afghans eligible to vote have come forward to register so far. Meanwhile, he has set up the new election law—the first of the post-war period. It guarantees a single vote to every citizen aged 18 and over; the law limits the duration of the election campaign to 30 days; and states that a Presidential candidate will win by a simple majority, among other clauses. The new law also dictates guidelines on the composition of Afghanistan’s bicameral parliament.

Karzai also met with the country’s opium warlords recently. All are friendly to both the United States and President Karzai, but none would disband, or even disarm their huge militias. They would rather wait, as they had always done before. With bumper opium crops, they will get bigger and stronger.

But President Karzai is aware that none of these ensures holding elections in September, or ushering in stability in Afghanistan. Since May, the anti-United States and anti-Karzai militants—a mixture of Taliban, al-Qaeda, foreign mercenaries from Chechnya, Uzbekistan, and China’s Xinjiang province, and Islamic Jihadis of Pakistan—have launched hit-and-run attacks throughout southern, southeastern, central, and northeastern Afghanistan. It is likely, if not a certainty, that they are helped from time to time by the warlords who have promised President Karzai the safe holding of the elections.

There exists a variety of complex reasons why Afghanistan is not fit for holding elections now. Among those myriad

of reasons, two stand out prominently. These are: the security situation inside Afghanistan; and the opium explosion. Both are thriving on each other, but individually each one is devastating as well.

Karzai’s Lack of Authority

To begin with, Karzai, a Popalzai Pushtun, was close to the Taliban when the Islamic militia emerged in the southern part of Afghanistan in 1994, but never had authority over any of the warlords. He was never in the good books of Pakistan Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), either. His honeymoon with the Taliban was short-lived. In 1999, his father was gunned down in Quetta, Pakistan. Karzai believes the killers were the Taliban. Subsequently, Karzai settled in Pakistan with the objective of linking up with the anti-Taliban forces led by the Northern Alliance. But Karzai reported that in early 2001, he had been served with an expulsion order by Pakistani intelligence, that he had to be out of the country by the end of that September, or he risked arrest or imprisonment, according to Steve Coll’s new book *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004). At that time, and partially even now, the Pakistani intelligence and military were providing all possible support to the Taliban/al-Qaeda combo.

The Popalzai Pushtun identity that propelled Karzai close to the Taliban in the 1990s was also the reason why he is considered a “suspect” by the anti-Taliban, non-Pushtun warlords. In 1994, when Hamid Karzai was the deputy foreign minister in the post-Soviet government of Tajik-Afghan warlord President Burhanuddin Rabbani, Karzai was sidling close to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a Pushtun mujahideen, who had been the CIA’s darling in the 1980s. Hekmatyar, at the time, was lobbing rockets into Kabul to kill the Rabbani Cabinet members.

Acting on a tip that Karzai was plotting against the government, the Defense Minister’s security chief, Mohammad Qaseem Fahim (who is now Karzai’s Defense Minister and one of the top Tajik-Afghan warlords, with his militia roaming inside Kabul), had sent intelligence officers to Karzai’s Kabul home. According to Coll’s account, “They arrested the deputy foreign minister and drove him to an interrogation center downtown, not far from presidential palace. For several hours Fahim’s operatives worked on Karzai, accusing him of collusion with Pakistan. Karzai has never provided a direct account of what happened inside the interrogation cell. . . . Several people he talked to afterward said that he was beaten up and that his face was bloodied and bruised. Some accounts place Fahim in the cell during parts of the interrogation.

“The session ended with a bang. A rocket lobbed routinely by Hekmatyar into Kabul’s center slammed into the intelligence compound where Karzai was interrogated. In the ensuing chaos Karzai slipped out of the building and walked dazed into Kabul’s streets. He made his way to the city bus station

and quietly slipped onto a bus headed for Jalalabad. There a friend from the United Nations recognized Karzai walking on the street; his patrician face banged up and bruised, and helped him to a relative's house. The next day Hamid Karzai crossed the Khyber Pass into exile in Pakistan."

From the above incident, it is evident that Karzai had never been in a position to exercise authority over the warlords, from the time the Americans made him an interim President in 2001. The only friend he had then, it seems, was the American neo-con Zalmay Khalilzad, who is now the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan. Khalilzad and Karzai went to the American University in Beirut around the same time and know each other from those days. Khalilzad was on the board of directors of the American oil corporation Unocal, along with former U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan Robert Oakley, a known Afghan-handler, at the time Taliban was getting friendly with the oil company. Unocal had formed a financial partnership to build the pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan in the 1990s. Taliban's military victory rejuvenated Unocal and the oil crowd in Washington. Coll quotes Khalilzad's assessment in an op-ed in the Oct. 7, 1996, *Washington Post* "It is time for the United States to re-engage [in Afghanistan]. The Taliban does not practice the anti-U.S. style fundamentalism practiced by Iran. It is closer to the Saudi model."

Khalilzad moved out of the Taliban fan club after Karzai's father was killed.

The Opium Explosion

The security situation has further worsened, because of the continuing U.S. support to the Afghan warlords. In September 2003, in a letter to President Karzai, who was in the United States to meet President Bush, the New York-based Human Rights Watch urged Karzai to "ask the United States once and for all to end the supply of arms and money to the warlords who are destabilizing Afghanistan and intimidating Afghans throughout the country."

The warlords now virtually run the regions. Most of them collect taxes and do not send even a part of the revenue to Kabul. Outwardly, they are supportive of Karzai, as long as Kabul does not interfere with their murderous activities. Nominally allied to Karzai, the powerful commanders run private armies and operate with relative impunity. Some benefit from the rampant opium trade, using the money to buy arms and to finance their militias, diplomats and analysts say. Private jails are common. Human rights groups blame militia commanders for a long list of abuses ranging from extorting money from businesses to breaking into homes, stealing property, smuggling cars, and drug trafficking.

The other unchanging façade of Afghanistan is the growing clout of opium. Skyrocketing production has officials worried that traffickers may potentially act to disrupt parliamentary and Presidential elections scheduled for September. The estimated opium production this year could be anywhere

between 4,000-4,200 tons. The much-hyped Karzai government plan to eradicate opium poppy this year has resulted in more land being put under poppy cultivation, and so, more opium will be hauled in by the warlords.

The central element in the government's anti-drug effort was a cruel joke. A \$3.6 million program that aims to cut poppy production by 25,000 hectares this year failed to cut anything at all. The campaign, sponsored by the British-run Central Poppy Eradication Force, started in April in the southern province of Nangarhar, one of Afghanistan's highest poppy-producing provinces. It failed to produce any result, simply because those who run the poppy-eradication program on the ground and those who earn money from the opium harvest were often the same people. Farmers in Nangarhar say that they can pay a fixed fee of \$100 per acre to convince local officials to overlook their poppy fields.

Strategic Setback

More opium production means more power to the warlords and further marginalization of Karzai and the Americans. For Karzai, and the warlords, Afghanistan remaining as before matters little. But, for the United States, among other nations in the region, the wholesale takeover of Afghanistan by the warlords and drug mafia will pose serious strategic setbacks.

U.S. strategic priorities are shifting in Central Asia, raising the likelihood that the United States will establish a long-term presence in the region. Under the Bush Administration's still-developing plans, U.S. military forces hope to maintain small-scale outposts in Uzbekistan, and possibly Kyrgyzstan. Uzbek officials seem receptive to such an arrangement.

Since 9/11, the United States has set up bases in Central Asia—at Khanabad in Uzbekistan, and at Manas in Kyrgyzstan—for playing a key support role for ongoing U.S. anti-terrorist operations in Afghanistan. It is evident that the anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan was a mere pretext. In reality, America is showing a great deal of interest in expanding the existing infrastructure to be prepared for future strategic contingencies in Asia. U.S. officials also have hinted at exploring the formation of an Asian collective security organization, a so-called "Asian NATO." In addition, Washington is clearly making efforts to strengthen military ties with Japan, Southeast Asian states, and Australia. Thus, the determination to retain access to Central Asia meshes with Washington's overall strategy in Asia.

Afghanistan remaining firmly in the hands of warlords and drug traffickers will jeopardize, significantly, the "grand strategic vision" of the Bush Administration's Pentagon. On the other hand, without the warlords and opium explosion, the U.S. presence in Afghanistan would be well nigh impossible. Some observers believe that the so-called war against terrorism launched on Afghanistan was a pretext to go to Central Asia and prepare for the Iraq War. To that length, President Karzai has served his benefactors well.