

Afghan Election: Opium And Warlords Abound

By Ramtanu Maitra

On Sept. 29, at the U.S. House International Relations Committee hearing on the upcoming Oct. 9 presidential election in Afghanistan, Democrats and Republicans broke out into bitter partisan bickering. U.S Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage's assuring voice saying "the election is going pretty damn good" did not soothe the raw nerves of the lawmakers.

Election: A Farce?

Thousands of miles away in Afghanistan, the situation is much tenser. The personal bickering between the major Presidential candidates, threats from the warlords that are strengthening day-by-day because of the input of narcotics trafficking money, and violence assured by the anti-Kabul and anti-U.S. Taliban militia, have created a surreal situation. It is evident that the "pretty damn good" election will be held, but what good it will do to establish the rule of law in Afghanistan is anyone's guess.

Security concerns have prompted most of the 18 candidates to urge that the election be postponed. U.S. forces in Afghanistan vowed on Sept. 29 to bolster security before the landmark election, as Taliban guerrillas bent on disrupting the vote launched a new wave of attacks. How this effort to improve the dangerous security situation can provide, in just ten days, what 17,000 U.S. troops and some 8,000 International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) under the NATO leadership, could not assure in almost three years is, again, anyone's guess. What is real is that the Afghan Interim President Hamid Karzai, a Pushtun and a handmaiden of Washington, has not dared to go outside of Kabul to campaign. The risks are too great. His one foray to campaign outside of Kabul was met with rocket attacks.

What is worrying all of them is the threat of violence issued by the Taliban-types. These militants have made sure that those were not empty promises. Since the end of summer, violence in Afghanistan has grown multifold, as it has increased in Iraq as well. But the Bush Administration, with the American Presidential election around the corner, would not like to admit the existence of the Taliban muscle. Admitting the fact that Taliban, or other anti-Kabul, anti-U.S. forces are alive and well, may sound like an admission of failure, the Bush Administration worries. That is why when

New Jersey Democratic Rep. Robert Menendez, pointing out the fear of Taliban guerrillas that has kept candidates from campaigning, and has kept President Hamid Karzai, the election front-runner, largely confined to the capital, Kabul, said, "I think we have to stop sugarcoating the realities of what is happening in Afghanistan and in our other conflicts and be honest with the American people," Armitage countered by saying the Taliban was "very much running from hidey hole to hidey hole, that they're very much on their back foot."

But, the realities on the ground do not support the deputy secretary's assertions. His view is contested right and left by all those who were, and are presently, in Afghanistan. Even the head of the U.S.-led coalition forces in Afghanistan, the U.S. Army Lieutenant General David Barno, told the media on Sept. 27: "We see some indications that al-Qaeda is apparently encouraging attempts to disrupt the election process . . . clearly for all terrorist organizations in the region, disrupting this free election which is impending here in Afghanistan, of which they are not a part, is—it appears to be—a shared objective."

Threats Are Real

Barno said al-Qaeda members and other non-Afghan fighters are operating in the rugged mountain area that borders Pakistan's semi-autonomous tribal regions.

"We see some indications that Al-Qaeda is apparently encouraging attempts to disrupt the election process," Barno said. "We also see al-Qaeda and foreign-fighter involvement. Particularly in the southeast—in the Paktia, Paktika, Khost area, in that border region opposite North and South Waziristan, which is where the Pakistanis have been conducting a number of their operations."

The U.S. military has told the media that the Taliban elements remain active in southern provinces like Uruzgan, Zabul, Helmand, and Kandahar. Most of the residents of these provinces are Pushtuns, the very ethnic base of President Karzai, and opium is grown in hundreds of thousands acres in these provinces. But Afghan officials say they scored an important victory recently when a senior Taliban commander, Mawlawi Ghafar, was killed in an ambush in Uruzgan Province. Ghafar became a top Taliban commander after he was released from the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

In a 52-page report, "The Rule of the Gun," issued on Sept. 29 from Kabul, the New York-based Human Rights Watch group has pointed out that major security and human rights problems persist, and seriously endanger the country's future.

Warlords to the Fore

Political repression by local strongmen is the principal problem. Throughout the country, militarized political fac-

tions—militias and remnants of past Afghan military forces who came into power in the wake of the Taliban's defeat, to cement their hold on political power at the local level, using force, threats, and corruption to stifle more legitimate political activity—dominate the election process. Independent political organizers unaffiliated with factions or their militia forces are facing death threats and harassment, and are struggling just to organize. Some politically active Afghan men and women, potential leaders who would otherwise be eager to take part in the political life of their country, have instead already opted out of the process, or are very cautious in their activities, literally afraid for their lives.

Voters in many rural areas have already been told how to vote by warlords and regional commanders, and given the general political repression and unfamiliarity with democratic processes, they are likely to obey. While there exists a genuine shortfall of international forces to secure the voting places, what amazes the Afghans to no end is the readiness with which the current security plans for the Presidential election include the use of deputized warlord or factional forces to guard polling stations—the very people the Afghans say they're most afraid of.

The report went on to point out that there is a sense of disappointment running through Afghanistan today. People are tired of government positions being held by abusive warlords, and they are insulted that the international community appears to think that these military commanders are innocuous, that they have "reformed," or that they are otherwise acceptable. Most Afghans want the warlords out of power, and are angry that Afghanistan's political processes so far—including two Loya Jirgas (grand councils) in 2002 and 2003—have simply been legitimizing their influence.

"Credible elections are seen by many Afghans as the way to transform the country from a loose set of warlord-led fiefdoms into a functioning nation with a legitimate civilian government that protects citizens' human rights. In this sense, elections are seen not only as a goal in Afghanistan—a good in and of itself—but also a means of addressing human rights issues and warlordism," the report adds.

One of the major problems with the Afghan political process, touted by Washington as a success story, is that it has remained a farce. Much of Afghanistan's political activity is dominated by the warlord factions. There are numerous parties which are merely proxies for the various military factions, or sub-factions within them. Afghanistan's registration law prohibits parties from maintaining their own private militias, but since most militia forces have an official status as divisions or battalions under the control of the Ministry of Defense, faction "parties" can disingenuously claim that they have no private forces. The 10th Army Division, for instance—official units under the control of the Kabul government—are actually factional forces

controlled by the Ittihad-e Islami faction (“Ittihad”), which in turn is controlled by the powerful faction leader Abdul Rabb al-Rasul Sayyaf.

Moreover, some factions changed their party names for registration purposes, possibly to avoid running afoul of the law. Most members of Jamiat-e Islami (Jamiat), for instance, a mujahidin military force which fought against the Soviet occupation, are now organized as the political party *Nehzat-e Melli*. Ittihad, a Pashtun armed faction, is now known as *Daw’at-e Islami*. Parties which change their name can then disingenuously claim that they have no official link with any military faction, and claim to be independent.

It is also evident that despite the U.S. Deputy Secretary’s promises made to the lawmakers on Capitol Hill, relief is not on the way. Afghanistan is still without an adequately staffed professional and independent police force, and the justice system barely functions. The NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and various Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs)—international joint military-civilian teams operated by various nations in Afghanistan—have assisted in some protection efforts, but have been unable to bring an overall sense of improved security across the country. The main and continuing reason for their weakness has been the inadequate number of troops made available to their operations by NATO member nations, analysts claim.

Blooming Poppies

Another major constraint to any meaningful election in Afghanistan is the drug scene. When he appeared at the House International Relations hearing, Deputy Secretary Armitage was asked about the drug scene. He cleverly answered that “More work was needed and that there was a strategy that was ‘still secret and still classified’ to confront Afghanistan’s poppy production.” But the facts are not difficult to discern, although the “still secret and still classified” methods to change the drug scene remain to be found out.

The specter of nearly 300,000 acres of poppy cultivation this year would empower both traffickers and the terrorists they feed, experts claim. One of the groups that benefits heavily from poppy production is the *Hezb-i-Islami*, of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, once the blue-eyed boy of the Americans. *Hezb-i-Islami* uses poppy proceeds to oppose the pro-U.S. Afghan government. The group also is believed to ship funds to fundamentalist groups in Uzbekistan, scene of a serious rise in terrorism.

Al-Qaeda “possibly” is a beneficiary, analysts say. Al-Qaeda and the Taliban operate along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, generally evading efforts by U.S. and Pakistani forces to hunt them down. While 90% of the poppy ends up in European streets to satisfy heroin habits, U.S. interests are negatively affected as well. A newly declassified U.S. analysis shows that the Taliban militia, although weakened since being driven from power in Afghanistan in 2001, “almost definitely” reaps profits from the poppy trade.

Mere Talk

“Dismantling the opium economy will be a long and complex process,” Antonio Maria Costa, Executive Director of the UN’s Office on Drugs and Crime, said in the organization’s latest report on narcotic production in Afghanistan.

“It simply cannot be done by military and authoritarian means. That has been tried in the past and was unsustainable. It must be done with the instruments of democracy, the rule of law and development.”

But, that is all talk as of now. According to available reports, for instance, in Imam Saheb, a small town in the northern province of Kunduz, 190 heroin processing labs operate. The reason: the enormous profit a farmer can make through poppy cultivation in a plot of land where he cannot grow anything else. The *Christian Science Monitor* reported on July 24, 2003: “Afghan anti-narcotics officials estimate that a kilo of heroin in Afghanistan is worth from \$5,000 to \$20,000, but in the international black market the price soars, from \$70,000 to \$300,000. The value varies according to quality.”

The market price may vary from U.S. \$70,000 to \$300,000, but the important factor is that the value, as well as volume, of heroin keeps increasing as it travels from the manufacturer to the user on its tortuous route. Each intermediary handler adds substances according to his fancy, from milk powder to quinine, to increase the bulk and multiply profits. By the time it reaches the users in their dark alleys, the 450 tons that started from Afghanistan would be no less than 1,800 tons. It would fetch a mind-boggling sum of \$540 billion to the retailers.

The power of poppy is so strong that it can destroy all classified and secret operations to eradicate it. Arnaud de Borchgrave, writing for the *Washington Times* on July 8, 2003, stated, “A ranking Afghan official, speaking privately, said: ‘The drug trafficking has corrupted everything in today’s Afghanistan, from the central Transitional Authority in Kabul to the warlords who really run the country.’” James Astill, writing for *The Scotsman* on Nov. 24, 2003, said that “British and Afghan officials in Kabul privately complain that their efforts have been badly compromised by the U.S.’s ongoing military campaign against the Taliban and al-Qaeda.” The U.S. employs local warlords to prosecute its war, including many allegedly involved in opium production. U.S. special forces in southern Helmand province last week told *The Scotsman* that they routinely patrol through opium fields, but had no orders to interfere,” he says.

The situation is grave. Lieutenant General Aleksandr Markin, the top Russian officer responsible for supervision of the Tajik-Afghan border, wrote in an article in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, Nov. 10, 2003, “In the first 10 months of this year, the haul is already 4,888.095 kilograms, of which 2,575.659 kilograms has been heroin (63% of this “hard” drug was seized on the sector of the Moscow Border Detachment).