



Afghanistan's Democracy: A Sustainable Long-term Goal?

By: Khatira Zearmal

One of Afghanistan's policy aims is to become a pluralist democracy¹; however, there is a mounting fear as to what will happen after NATO forces hand over control to the Afghan government and by extension, to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) who will henceforth maintain peace and security and fighting throughout the country. Many citizens and outside stakeholders question whether the country will plunge back into a bloody civil war or anarchy. Or will Afghanistan maintain its current democratic position? Democracy in Afghanistan seemingly rests on the edge of a knife; if disaster strikes it will be both swift and bloody. Time will be the ultimate test for the fragile Afghan government.

The Taliban may be simply biding their time until the mass exodus of foreign troops in 2014. Efforts to defeat the insurgency have been largely unsuccessful. There have been numerous reports about a series of killings² known as 'green-on-blue' or insider attacks in which some Afghan security personnel turn their weapons on Coalition forces. Reasons for such attacks could include personal animosity³ for what the coalition represents or, in some cases, the Taliban have successfully integrated their agents within the ANA and ANP. Tangential incidents such as the reportedly accidental Quran burning in February 2012 add fuel to the already scorching fire of hate these people have towards the west and act as pivots of propaganda upon which the insurgency can recruit new members or instill a more radical ideology among the rest of society. Insider attacks pose a major threat in this eleven-year war, and such occurrences paint a grim picture for Afghanistan's progression into a stronger democratic state.

Also, Afghan forces lack sufficient military might to ward off national security threats. First Vice President, Mohammad Qasim Fahim, has cautioned that security in the country could deteriorate if Afghan forces are not provided with the necessary equipment before the withdrawal of foreign troops in 2014.⁴ Without the additional equipment, Afghan forces will be heavily dependent on local citizens to help maintain security after foreign troops' withdrawal. This view is quite contrary, for example, to the optimistic confidence from the British forces who believe that Afghans are definitely ready to "take the lion's share of the combat role."⁵ Indeed, lack of access to advanced weaponry and intelligence collection training will severely compromise the effectiveness of Afghan security bodies in the post-2014 context. Any popular apprehension regarding the capability to defend their country will provide Jihadists with traction to further mobilize their message and create further complications in this already war torn country.

The rag tag revolts that had occurred in Afghanistan over the past five months symbolise another potential national security threat as small, armed groups emerge in order to combat the Taliban insurgency. As a new phenomenon, the complexities and implications surrounding these armed groups in the broader context of the insurgency remain unclear. The root causes of these uprising provide a critical area for future research. By what

¹ As a Muslim nation, Afghanistan is determined to become a member of the family of pluralistic democracies' Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, Afghanistan, Policy Areas

² 'Afghan soldier kills 2 NATO troops; Afghan soldiers turn guns on own unit' CNN News, 27 August 2012

³ 'Afghanistan Green on Blue attacks explained' thedailybeast.com, 27 August 2012

⁴ 'Fahim warns of post 2014 insecurity' AFP News, 8 September 2012

⁵ 'Phillip Hammond: the British troops could withdraw from Afghanistan before 2014', The telegraph, 14 September 2012

means did these individuals participating in these rebellions obtain their equipment and resources from? If this problem is not recognised and the issue not investigated or monitored, it could potentially create disorders for the government and result in yet another militant or Taliban-style group emerging who will robustly oppose the Afghan regime.

Similarly, the recent fringe film made representing Prophet Mohammed a both unethical and a womaniser sparked rage and demonstrations throughout twenty countries in the Muslim world. While the outcry against the 'Innocence of Muslims' has been more subdued in Afghanistan than in other countries such as Sudan and Libya, it does not help the US Mission and further delays Afghanistan from making the progress they have set out to achieve. Because an Egyptian living in the United States made the film, it intensified the Afghan people's views towards the American presence in this nation. It further endangers US troops based here and undermines Coalition efforts to establish peace in this war-inflicted land.

More controversially, however, corruption allegations that swarm the Afghan government. Domestic analysts and laymen alike question how the ANA and ANP continue the fight against the Taliban insurgency when they cannot even trust the credibility of their overseers within government.⁶ After all, a government must lead by example and corruption will only breed to social disdain and perhaps even hostility towards corrupt officials. This furthers the cause of the Taliban and other militant groups such as Hezb-i-Islami who seek to destabilize the government and who will clutch at anything, including allegations of corruption, to have their way. Moreover, all this controversy simply sidelines the real issues facing Afghanistan including widespread poverty, a huge dependence upon foreign aid and widespread refusal to recognize women's rights to name a few.

The government therefore, quite justly scrutinized, has largely failed to provide services to the Afghan people. The overall political governance of this country has been very weak and disorganized, with various officials and governmental bodies acting with impunity and self-interest. To outside observers, many of these actions do not appear guided by any clear, long-term objective or even a moral code.

President Hamid Karzai's has made multiple changes in his government to try and consolidate his position. However, it remains to be seen whether his efforts have been effective. President Karzai reintroduced a disqualified Interior Minister into an important security position, a move seen as ridiculous by most and that undermined the credibility of the government. The ex-Interior Minister and current Defence Minister, Bismillah Khan Mohammadi, was previously dismissed from his former position for his inability to effectively stem cross border attacks by Pakistan into Afghanistan.⁷ The million-dollar question is how this particular individual could then be able to perform his current, prominent role as a Defence Minister successfully, if he was ruled incompetent a short time ago? Karzai's decision to replace various officials including the ex-minister was

⁶ 'Corruption in Afghanistan is the biggest problem as foreign forces prepare to leave' CBS News, 18 May 2012

⁷ 'Rumours surface of Karzai's Plan to re-introduce disqualified Interior Minister', TOLONews.com, 27 August 2012

seen as the first step aimed at solidifying his power before the elections and the foreign withdrawal in 2014.⁸

Afghan people are very distrustful of the government especially with the up-coming elections looming. The nation is waiting to see whether these elections will be transparent and fair. As a result, the government should take advantage of this opportunity to restore its reputation and regain the trust of the Afghan people by establishing itself as a credible and a dependable government.

As far as the establishment of a pluralist democracy is concerned, the government needs to immediately tackle the issue of corruption as it is a cancer that eats away at the very heart of the country's prolonged stability. Corruption undermines every action taken by the government and this body particularly requires constructing and adherence to concrete and clear plans that could later morph into effective actions which would of benefit to Afghanistan.

Long-term negotiations with the Taliban and other militant groups should be continued in order to collectively decide how the state should run its affairs. After all, the armed forces cannot be the only solution to establishing prolonged peace. With regards to tackling insider attacks, the police and the armed forces should be regulated properly and the recruitment process should be more thorough in order to effectively weed out potentially dangerous individuals and determine who possible Taliban sympathizers are.

With the way things stand currently, it is highly doubtful that Afghanistan will ever prove victorious in its goal of establishing and strengthening a pluralist democracy in the wake of the 2014 transition. Improvements will only be made if the government, police, and armed forces work together as one to achieve the common goal of security, peace, and democracy. The security of Afghanistan is still lacking; thus, it must be strengthened and developed as the most important backbone of the Afghan government. The Defense and Interior Ministries, for instance, must be sufficiently equipped and advanced accordingly. Most significantly though, the Afghan National Security Forces must understand the importance of maintaining their nation's security and strive to achieve a peaceful society for the next generation of Afghans by co-operating with the government in getting rid of the militancy that has plagued Afghanistan for decades.

⁸ 'Karzai names picks to replace ousted ministers, spy chief', Pajhwok Afghan News, 2 September, 2012