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The Challenge of Post-Taliban Governance

M. NAZIF SHAHRANI

The recent military victory by the US and British forces in Iraq and its immediate aftermath of political chaos and uncertainty in that 'liberated' nation brings an added urgency to addressing the problems of post-conflict governance in these multi-ethnic societies in the region. Explanations for these repeated political failures after military triumphs are both numerous and highly contentious. Suggestions for possible strategies to break out of the ongoing military-political impasse, while not as numerous, have been equally dyspeptic and strongly partisan not only among Afghan leaders and members of the ethnic and regional communities, but also among a growing cadre of international 'experts', as well as an occasional interested American politician. Remarkable, however, in these discourses (especially among Afghans) are two things: an overwhelming convergence of opinions about the objectives for a desirable political outcome in Afghanistan, and conflicting views on how and by what political means to accomplish them. The disagreements on the means and political strategies for realizing the national goals are becoming increasingly sharp, especially among those in Kabul and the powerful regional actors. These divergent centre-periphery political perspectives are informed by significantly different perceptions of national and local interests among the contenders.

Mismatched strategies

The Afghan state, like many other post-colonial states, was constituted on the basis of the old dynastic person-centred model of sovereignty in which the ruler exercised absolute power. The rulers, whether under the monarchy, Daoud's royal republic, the Khalq-Parcham Marxists, or the Mujahideen and Taliban regimes, and currently Chairman Karzai, have all attempted to rule over the country and its inhabitants as subjects rather than citizens. They have done so by relying on the use of force and maintaining/building a strong national army and police, complimented by their power to appoint and dismiss all government officials at will. Such a concentration of power has led to practices of which the outcomes have been nothing but tragic. Some of the more noteworthy of these legacies (earlier addressed in *ISIM Newsletter 6*, pp. 20–1) include the following: pervasive political mistrust between the rulers and their subjects, which has led to the general erosion of trust as a 'social capital' in Afghan society beyond the circles of immediate family, close kin, and ethno-linguistic/sectarian communities; commoditization of loyalties due to corruption, nepotism, and cronyism within a political economy of dependency and patron-client ties; exploitation of Islam (and other convenient ideologies) to preserve self-interest and the privileges of family, tribe, or ethnic group; and political marginalization and alienation of women and the so-called minorities (but also some Pashtun clans and tribes), who were often treated as mere 'internal-colonial' subjects, complemented with some degree of contempt, especially on the part of certain government officials.

One of the most disastrous consequences of the century of rule from Kabul was the onset of the Marxist coup of 1978, and the subsequent national turmoil that culminated in the rise of the Taliban. This form of

A quarter of a century of wars ending in military triumphs – by the Mujahideen against the Red Army and the Communist regimes; by the Taliban and al-Qaeda against the Mujahideen-Northern Alliance forces; and most recently by the US-led international coalition against the Taliban and al-Qaeda – have proven that achieving victory in the battlefield is easier than translating that victory into desired political objectives. The persistence of political failures following military victories in Afghanistan calls for a reasoned explanation of this major gap between means and ends, and a way out of the painful cycle of violence in the country.

tribal-based paternalistic state politics has produced other equally pernicious legacies, which if left unaddressed in the new Constitution could have considerable negative impact on the promises of building democratic governance in the country. Unfortunately, the persistent demands from the leaders of the current Transitional Administration to re-establish the central government rule throughout the country – i.e. by means of building another large and expensive national standing army and police – seem wrongheaded at best, and disastrous at worst. According to a 'Sneak Preview' of the recently

completed draft of the Constitution, by Amin Tarzi, in the *RFE/RL Afghanistan Report* (Vol. 2, No. 4, 24 April 2003), the Constitutional Drafting Commission has adopted, with very minor alterations, the 1964 Constitution of Afghanistan and submitted it to Chairman Karzai as the new Draft Constitution of the country for further study and discussions.

Any reasonable solution to the problem of future governance in Afghanistan must address at least three sets of domestic concerns: from the perspective of the war-weary and impoverished masses, especially the internally displaced and the returning refugees; from the perspective of those who hold (or aspire to) power in the capital, Kabul, and wish to expand their control over the rest of the country; and from the perspective of the local and regional leaders and their supporters who wish to retain their autonomy from the centre and ensure a significant stake in the future governance, reconstruction, and development of the country.

For the overwhelming majority of ordinary Afghans, the most pressing problem has been, and will remain, a general sense of physical insecurity in their homes, neighbourhoods, and the national highways and roads in many parts of the country, especially in the eastern and southern regions along the Pakistan borders. In view a recent study by a World Bank team which points to a growing recognition that 'there can be no peace without development and no development without peace' (<http://econ.worldbank.org/prr/CivilWarPRR>), a way must be found in Afghanistan to break the vicious cycles of violence and poverty. The resolution of the twin problems of peace and development is, however, contingent to a large measure upon the actions of the international community in conjunction with the Afghan leadership, at both the national and local levels.

Since they are currently unable to implement their strong centralized state project militarily, the Transitional Administration in Kabul is feverishly trying to accomplish the re-centralization of the government by financial, administrative, and judicial means through the activities of the powerful Ministries of Finance and Interior, and the Supreme Court. The mechanisms employed so far (with some degree of success) include: the introduction of new banknotes and centralization of the banking institutions, coupled with the demand by the Ministry of Finance (and Chairman Karzai) that all revenues from custom's duties collected at the border ports be forwarded to the central treasury.² The Ministry of Finance has been, however, less successful in centralizing control of the flow of international assistance by the donor nations

who prefer to spend their funds through the multitudes of international NGOs operating all across the country with the help of local and regional authorities. The Ministry of Interior and the Supreme Court are trying to accomplish their centralization projects by utilizing the best weapon within the arsenal of person-centred sovereignty-based rule – the appointment of loyal governors, other minor officials, and judges – in those provinces where they can do so. Chairman Karzai's virtual control over the appointments of the nine-member Constitutional Drafting Committee and the thirty-five-member Constitutional Commission may prove to be yet another powerful means for re-enshrinement of the strong centralized state by preventing the consideration or discussion of federalism or some other form of decentralization as alternative forms of governance in the new draft Constitution of Afghanistan. Unfortunately for Afghanistan, the current Transitional Administration's centralization project may prove to be extremely costly, both economically and in socio-political opportunities. Even if successful, such a project will only further aggravate the bedevilling problems of national security as well as the mounting ethnic and regional tensions within the country.

From subjects to citizens

In order to pave the way for peace and development in Afghanistan, the international community, together with the leaders of the Afghan Transitional Administration, and the local and regional leaders must be willing, at the minimum, to do three things, the first of which is to abandon the assumption that security may be obtained only by means of a large national army and police force. Instead, they ought to start thinking that security is fundamentally a problem of deteriorating trust as a valued social capital in Afghan society. Second, they should be willing to move away from the old and oppressive practices of person-centred sovereignty-based rule over an emasculated body of mistrusting subjects, and to become political managers and civil servants who are governing an empowered community of citizens. And third, they should adhere to and practice the tried and tested principles of community self-governance by means of elections and/or recruitment and hiring of civil servants rather than their appointment and dismissal by the rulers at all levels of government administration.

In the tense environment of a post-9/11 world, and in a war-ravaged and heavily armed Afghan population, it is not surprising that the leaders of the Transitional Administration see security solely in terms of building a strong military and police force to declare war on their real or imagined enemies. Such was also done by the USA after the 9/11 attacks. Even with the enormous firepower of the US Armed Forces, the war on terrorism is far from over, and US military victory remains in doubt, despite declarations to the contrary. More importantly, the 'war on terrorism' has not improved the sense of security for the American citizens at home or abroad. The reason for this lack of progress in winning this war may be the fact that the root causes of terrorism, which are fundamentally political, are utterly ignored or denied.

More than two decades of war and communal strife fuelled by hate and suspicion, not only towards the government but also between various ethnic and tribal communities, has brought the level of general trust within and between communities in Afghanistan to its absolute minimum. Contemplating more war by the central government against those whom they sometimes call the 'warlords' – a verbal weapon crafted by the Pakistani ISI in reference to those who resisted the Taliban conquest of their territories – will only produce more hate and violence. More importantly, the leaders of Afghanistan should take note of the historical fact that a strong national standing army, even when it was maintained at a huge cost, did not only defend the country; it also 'invited' the Soviet invasion of 1979. The creation of the 70,000-strong national army currently contemplated, at even greater financial cost, will be again a source of temptation by the rulers to be used against their own citizens as was done in the past.

However, there is a viable alternative to improve national defence against foreign enemies, as well as to boost internal security while laying important foundations for building communal trust. The verbal weapons of 'warlord' and 'warlordism', so widely used by the media, government officials, some researchers, and most 'experts' on the affairs of the country, should be abandoned. A concerted effort must be made to work with local rural communities to officially form and register community-based national defence units. This does not, however, mean that there is no need for a national army and police or a central



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An armed Afghan man watches a wrestling match at Kabul's only stadium.

government. Rather, it requires diligence in making a systematic assessment of how to re-organize appropriate governing structures in which the roles, powers, and responsibilities of the central, regional, provincial, and local governing bodies are clearly defined and the necessary institutional means (such as the appropriate size of the national army and police force) are made available to exercise their requisite powers and to fulfil their governance obligations. The establishment of such a viable state structure capable of stabilizing the country for national reconciliation and reconstruction requires further wisdom in enshrining the principle of community self-governance through elections and/or recruitment of the civil servants. Adopting community self-governance will be a crucial step toward a fair and equitable treatment of all ethnic, regional, and tribal groups alike. This will be possible only when a properly designed and organized complete census of the country's population is taken and appropriate demographic standards are established for organizing administrative units and electoral constituencies.

The opportunity is here, and the expectations, of both the battered peoples of Afghanistan and a caring and concerned international community, are very high. Are the leaders of Afghanistan ready to embark on a new and alternative political course which could transform the constitutive principles of governance in order to lay the foundation for a gradual and healthier change in the political culture of Afghan society? The Afghan leaders at both the centre and the periphery, the opinion makers at home and abroad, and the international advisors and analysts must steer clear of the sterile debates about federalism, warlordism, and the like. What requires close examination and adoption is a clear set of constitutive governance principles, which could truly help transform the impoverished masses of Afghan subjects into loyal and responsible citizens of their own communities – as well as a peaceful Afghan state. Such a set of democratic governance principles must reject and put an end to the possibility of reverting to the familiar patterns of person-centred politics, and of sovereign rulers with their cadre of kin and cronies holding on to power. It is for the sake of future generations, and in the hope of eliminating from Afghanistan and the world one of the principle political causes of terrorism – the sovereignty-based oppressive militaristic regimes in multi-ethnic states – that the leaders of Afghanistan must display the requisite wisdom and diligence to enshrine the right set of governance principles in the new Constitution of Afghanistan.

To do otherwise will mean the loss of a truly golden opportunity for the people of Afghanistan, the region, and the world.

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Notes

1. Shahrani, Nazif M., 'Resisting the Taliban and Talibanism in Afghanistan: Legacies of a Century of Internal Colonialism and Cold War Politics in a Buffer State', *Perception: Journal of International Affairs*, 4 (2000): 121-140.
2. The most lucrative of the border crossings is located in Herat province on the border with Iran, now controlled by Ismael Khan, and the Hayraton port on the Amu Draya bordering Uzbekistan, controlled jointly by General Dustom and General Atta in Mazar-i Sharif.