

Kabul: election prospects

*From Afghanistan
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By Najmuddin A. Shaikh

ON July 4, President Karzai received from the mayor of Philadelphia the Philadelphia Liberty Medal and pledged that the cash award of \$100,000 that accompanied the award would be used to support children orphaned by the many years of war in Afghanistan. In presenting the award the Mayor of Philadelphia recalled that the medal was awarded annually since 1989 to "recognize leadership in the pursuit of freedom" and added that the American people had recognized since the 9/11 attack the importance of promoting democracy worldwide. "Your fight is our fight. Your people are our people. And your future is our future," the Mayor told Karzai.

The award of the medal was perhaps the only good news for Karzai on America's independence day. He had come to the ceremony after attending the NATO summit in Istanbul on the June 29 where all the right noises were made regarding NATO's commitment to taking on the task of ensuring security for the Afghan elections scheduled for the end of September but far too little was done in concrete terms. NATO promised that by September they would send another 1500 troops to Afghanistan and another 2000 would be on standby for deployment if needed. These troops would set up another three PRTs in the north and would take over administrative control of the British run PRT in Mazar but there was no commitment of forces for the far more troubled southern provinces, nor was there any commitment made to providing the money that was sorely needed by the UN office to complete the preparations for the elections.

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and southeast of the country. In Uruzgan and Zabul the Americans claim that they have killed or captured over two dozen Taliban. But this does not seem to have affected the disruptive capacity of the Taliban and other anti-Karzai forces as evidenced by the car bomb attack on the governor of Helmand province in which the governor was seriously injured and his bodyguard killed. In the south and southeast the overall security situation remains fragile with few Karzai appointed officials feeling secure or being able to deliver on the promise of security.

Between the warlords in the north and west and the insurgency in the south and southeast it has become clear that Karzai has little hope of restoring to his benighted country even the minimum level of security needed to hold elections by the end of September or even as he has recently said in the Afghan month of Mizan which runs from September 22 to October 21.

The voter registration drive, having gathered momentum, has now slowed down again in the face of insurgent attacks that have killed at least three election workers in Jalalabad district and created panic among the election workers and potential voters alike. Theoretically 5.5 million voters out of a

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potential 10 million voters have been registered so far, and according to one estimate some 120,000 new voters are being added to the rolls every day. The first

election law can, according to the relevant UN officials, be changed by the Karzai administration but that would hardly be a good start for what is to be the era of democracy and the "rule of law". Second, the population estimates on the basis of which constituencies are to be determined have yet to be made available to the election officers. Third, the \$100 million plus required for the conduct of the elections only \$70 million have been pledged and of this only \$18 million have so far been received by the UN. Fourth, almost half of the eligible voters remain unregistered and the vast majority of these are in the Pushtun dominated heartland of Afghanistan.

These obstacles can perhaps be overcome but what can be done about the fact that there has been virtually no success in the DDR (Disarming Demobilizing and Reintegration) programme. According to the original plan some 40,000 of the 100,000 strong militia forces were to have been disarmed by the end of June. Currently reports based on official briefings suggest that the number disarmed is somewhere between 3500 and 9000. The variation, I believe, comes from the fact that many so called disarmed militia have rejoined their parent

warlord militias. It is noteworthy that the withdrawal of the militia even from Kabul is yet to be accomplished and the so-called surrender of heavy weapons by Marshal Fahim's Shura-i-Nazar has been a laughable farce. The ISAF commander lamenting the failure of the programme laid the blame squarely at the door of Marshal Fahim's ministry of defense but it seems to have made no difference to the power equation in Kabul or, more importantly to the degree of influence Fahim and his cohorts continue to enjoy with the American forces. In any case it seems naive to assume that any fair elections can be held while the vast part of the militias remain intact and

while local warlords continue to flout the authority of the centre.

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elections.

NATO's European members may say that they regard Afghanistan as their top priority and may even maintain that, unlike Iraq, they have no differences with the United States on the policy in Afghanistan but the facts on the ground belie the rhetoric. The Philadelphia mayor was right when he said that "your war is our war" because if one thing emerged clearly from the NATO meeting it was that Europe and the rest of America's "allies" world would do no more than the minimum in Afghanistan and it would be for America to carry the can for as long as it could sustain the will to do so.

If this was not disheartening enough for Karzai there was even more bad news on the domestic front. He came to the award ceremony after hearing that the office of his intelligence chief in Herat province had been taken over by the forces loyal to the local warlord. Ostensibly Ismail Khan had taken umbrage at Karzai's temerity in appointing intelligence chief without consulting him. In practice Ismail Khan's creation of another mini-crisis was designed to ensure that the disarming of part of his militia scheduled for July 5 was stopped in its tracks. This was the fourth time, since March, that local factional forces in the north and west either refused to let Karzai-appointed officials take up key provincial posts or drove them out.

If this was not enough he also got the news that his police chief in Mazar-i-Sharif had been confined to his home and his police force disarmed by the forces of Atta Mohammad, the local warlord and protégé of Defence Minister Marshal Fahim. The police chief had been accused by Atta Mohammad of being responsible for drug running, a source of income that Atta Mohammad probably felt should be available only to him. The forces Atta Mohammad used were of course the forces that theoretically are under the control of the Afghan Defence ministry and therefore subject to the orders of Marshal Fahim.

Karzai may have been pleased by the success that appears to have attended the American anti insurgency efforts in the south

some 120,000 new voters are being added to the rolls every day. The fact however is that voter registration in the south and southeast is at a virtual standstill and bogus registration in the north, driven by the ambitions of local warlords, has climbed to an all time high. During a recent visit to Kabul I was told that former president, Rabbani, had informed the election officials of cases that he had first hand information about dozens of cases in which women, duly veiled had registered seven or eight times and of many men who had done likewise. It seems that little can be done to correct this. Officials under pressure to show high figures of voter registration, requiring warlord cooperation to be able to carry out any registration work at all are inclined to turn a blind eye towards such fraud.

The bogus voter registration will have an immediate consequence in terms of strengthening the hand of the warlords in the north as and when elections are held but it will also have the long-term consequence, with potentially disastrous results of turning the Pushtun majority or at least plurality ethnic group into a minority. The Pushtuns should have seen the forthcoming elections as an opportunity to correct what they rightly perceive as their illegitimate marginalization in the power structure now set up in Kabul. Instead what the failure of the voter registration drive in the Pushtun south and southeast and the bogus registration in the north will do is give legal cover to the current Tajik domination in Kabul. The election then will become a divisive rather than a uniting force in an Afghanistan that at least so far has managed to an admirable degree to resist an erosion of Afghan nationalism.

But this lies in the future. The current problem is that elections are almost certainly not going to be held as scheduled. The first obstacle is the election law, which requires that the date of the election and the demarcation of the constituencies for the parliament be announced at least 90 days in advance. The deadline for this expired on the July 1 if the elections were to be held on the September 30 and will expire shortly if a date in the first half of October is chosen. The

Despite these problems there are enormous American pressure for elections to be held as scheduled and thus giving President Bush at least a semblance of a foreign policy success before the November elections. Ambassador Khalilzade has said the problem of militias is exaggerated offering at this late date the estimate that the local militias number about 40,000 rather than the generally accepted figure of 100,000. Presumably he now wants to regard the Fahim militia in Kabul and the Atta Mohammad and Dostum militias in the North as part of the Afghan national army. President Karzai has said that even if 50 per cent of the eligible voters are registered a fair election was possible. He has been talking to warlords about power sharing in return for their support in the elections. In other words, as some cynical Afghans put it, do whatever is necessary to give the Bush administration a chance to declare victory.

For Pakistan there are two problems that arise. First despite the operation in South Waziristan and the general crackdown on extremist forces, with its beneficial consequences for America's battle against the Taliban in Afghanistan, Pakistan will remain the convenient scapegoat for the shortcomings of American policy in Afghanistan. Second if farcical elections are held in Afghanistan and the Pushtun are disenfranchised, as seems likely, there will be fresh turbulence and fresh problems on Pakistan's borders.

Can the Americans be persuaded to change their policies? Analysts have criticized Karzai for clumsy attempts to impose his will on warlords, by sending in appointees to try to implement disarmament without necessary support bases. The fact is that Karzai's muscle and support can come only from the Americans. If this is not forthcoming there is little Karzai can do except trying to bluff his way through. Similarly Karzai's efforts at the disarming of Kabul and reconciliation with the "moderate" Taliban can succeed only if the Americans crack the whip on the Northern Alliance. This does not seem likely.

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