

Karzai's new status

Affghani
7/11/04 Th. Kees

Three years back, when President Karzai was handpicked by Washington to head the interim government of Afghanistan following the overthrow of the Taliban regime, many doubts were expressed about his ability to steer the troubled Afghanistan out of its turmoil. The problems of Afghanistan were and still are viewed as overwhelming which may require a sustained treatment. In addition it unanimously agreed to support all kinds of approaches that can help in securing the much-desired stability in Afghanistan.

For the last two decades Afghanistan has been experiencing both civil war and occupation by external forces. For obvious reasons the internal mess generated concerns and apprehensions not just for the immediate neighbours but also for all those entrusted with the task of maintaining international peace and stability. Following the departure of Taliban, the most daunting task was how Afghanistan should be governed. Even more important was who should take charge of Afghanistan during the initial period.

The man selected for the job or as some would put it installed in Afghanistan was a 46-year-old Pakhtoon whose main task was to bridge the gulf among the tribes and secure some semblance of unity in a deeply divided Afghan society. President Karzai not only lived up to the expectations of all concerned but has achieved something which never been part of the Afghan traditions. Soon after the BONN Agreement of 2002, a transitional government headed by Karzai started functioning in Kabul.

Undoubtedly during the earlier period the writ of Afghan government did not run much beyond Kabul itself. Although things have improved and currently the writ of Kabul government is relative extended but it still is far from a satisfactory level. Nevertheless many factors were favourably operative. To begin with the interna-

tional community not only recognised Karzai as the head of the interim Afghan government but also extended the much needed aid and assistance.

Another factor that facilitated the advent of Karzai regime was general disillusionment of the Afghans with Taliban regime. The excesses committed by Talibans did not go down well with general Afghan public. Dissatisfied with the style of governance that was practised by the Talibans, and fed up with internal civil war which has lasted over a decade; many Afghans quietly accepted the change though with some suspicions. With the passage of time apprehensions also began to disappear.

In November 2003 not only President Karzai was able to convene Loya Jirgas but also he successfully managed to secure an agreed constitution for Afghanistan. The new Constitution opted for a presidential system of governance. Once the Constitution was adopted, the next main task was to hold the presidential elections. In order to hold elections the list of legitimate voters needed to be prepared. This is all the more difficult if one realises that the Afghan society has never experienced an election. They are quite familiar with selection processes but elections are somewhat unknown to them. However in this connection the United Nations came to the assistance of the Afghan government. Despite so many difficulties the UN workers were able to secure the enlistments of a fairly large number of voters on voters register. Almost ten millions registered themselves as legitimate voters and out of the total enlistment, roughly about 40 percent were female voters.

Cognizant of difficulties confronting the candidate during the election campaigns, the campaign was not all that extensive primarily because of lack of security. The campaigns were still undertaken despite the continuous nature of threats issued by the Talibans. During the



Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema

The writer works for Islamabad Policy Research Institute
picheema@ipripak.org

course of actual election itself the problems of multiple voters' card and the poor quality of Indian supplied indelible ink did attract strong criticism from many quarters.

Since no elections have ever been held in Afghanistan, the recently concluded presidential election on October 9, 2004 marks a beginning of a new era. Being the first elections, it is

Pakistan has always been eager to see a stable and peaceful Afghanistan. Being its immediate Muslim neighbour and having a sizable Pakhtoon population, the Pakistanis earnestly desire to have close ties with their Afghan brethren. Instability in Afghanistan is always a source of great concern for Pakistan as it can spill over into Pakistan

an important milestone in country's history. Despite the threats of Talibans and diversified activities of the warlords, the election was conducted in 37 provinces with 5000 polling stations including many in Pakistan and Iran. Something like 18 candidate contested the elections. The successful conclusion of presidential election is indeed a major step forward.

The peaceful injections of democratic methods into the tribal Afghan society was indeed not an easy task but determination of the incumbent leadership along with the expressed support of international community and regional neighbours, the first major hurdle on way to a democratic regime has been successfully crossed. It is a tremendous achievement if one is familiar with problems of warlords, activities of Talibans, drug barons and easily annoyed tribal leaders. To make the difficulties even more complex, there are some outside powers that

try to grind their own axes than sincerely helping the developmental processes.

On Wednesday the United Nations-Afghan Joint Electoral Management Body has announced that President Hamid Karzai has secured over 55 percent of the total votes polled. This means there is not need for a run off elections. According to the Afghan Constitution if none of the candidate receive more than 50 percent of the votes in the first round, a run-off election shall be held within two weeks. In the second round only candidates with highest number of votes could participate.

President Karzai has become the first democratically elected president of Afghanistan. While some of his opponents have accepted his victory, there were others who stressed that they would wait till the outcome of a UN investigation into alleged fraud on October 9. The independent investigation panel has already given its ruling that polling day irregularities could not and had not materially affected the outcome.

While Karzai has now got the necessary popular mandate, it is advisable that he begins to focus on the problems of warlords and concentrate on the security issues. In this connection the Pakistani government has gone out of the way to ensure that its borders are sealed for all the undesirable elements that have been causing all kinds of headaches for both the Afghan and Pakistan rulers.

The problems emanating from lawlessness are indeed immense which in

turn are continuously taking a heavy toll of developmental work. Violence still reigns supreme in many parts of Afghanistan. The Afghans overwhelmingly voted for Karzai hoping that he would not only unite the fractured Afghan society but would also improve the overall security situation in the country. They expect that a national security force would soon replace the existence of private armies of warlords.

It is often alleged that the development process is moving at a snail's pace and some aid agencies have even closed their operational offices because of the existing insecurity. In addition the warlords need to be reigned in. In fact some of the warlords have encouraged poppy cultivation that is fast facilitating Afghanistan return to its earlier dubious distinction of being a biggest exporter of drugs. Karzai also need to focus on checking illegal trade.

Pakistan has always been eager to see a stable and peaceful Afghanistan. Being its immediate Muslim neighbour and having a sizable Pakhtoon population, the Pakistanis earnestly desire to have close ties with their Afghan brethren. Instability in Afghanistan is always a source of great concern for Pakistan as it can spill over into Pakistan. Pakistan is looking forward to have friendly and cordial relations with democratic Afghanistan.

The first democratically elected President of Afghanistan is going to be installed on Dec 1, 2004. Being an elected president, his position is far more strengthened than what was the case in the past. However he still has to carefully carve a path through a multitude of ethnic groups, unite the fractured Afghan society, eliminate the private armies, deal effective with the menace of drug trafficking, strengthen national security apparatus and accelerate the process of development and reconstruction of Afghanistan.