

Ballot boxes in the battlefield

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WORLD VIEW

By Mahir Ali

ALTHOUGH one can never be too sure about the ever-optimistic US Secretary of Defence, even Donald Rumsfeld is unlikely to claim that next Saturday's presidential election will miraculously usher in an era of peaceful, representative rule in Afghanistan. But will it at least signify a new beginning for a nation that has, by every measure and from any point of view, suffered too much for far too long?

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Unfortunately, the available evidence suggests that Afghanistan doesn't quite fit the bill either.

Outside Kabul, the security situation is considerably more daunting than it was under the Taliban. To concede this is not to praise that odious bunch of fanatics or to condone the coercive means they employed to maintain law and order. But let us also not forget that fundamentalism wasn't restricted to Mullah Omar's acolytes, and some of the worst practices associated with the Taliban continue, in one form or another, to flourish under their successors.

came close to wrapping up its operations. President Hamid Karzai himself has admitted that warlords — the collective strength of whose private militias substantially exceeds the strength of the nascent US-trained Afghan National Army — pose a far bigger threat than the remnants of the Taliban. Yet the occupation is based on deals with petty despots who run their fiefdoms pretty much as they please — which helps to explain why poppy cultivation has grown exponentially since the Taliban killjoys were chased away.

The US evidently believes that this is the best way of isolating and tracking down bands of Taliban and Al Qaeda cadres,

registered voters will be casting their ballots under coercion. But intimidation has many dimensions in a predominantly feudal milieu. There is certainly cause for concern over intimidation by the Taliban, which is bound to affect turnout in southern Afghanistan. But the even bigger danger is that lords of the fiefs all over the country will dictate how their serfs vote. And in a nation with a high rate of illiteracy, where popular representation is a novel concept, that may come to be seen as the norm.

Let's hope it doesn't turn out that way. But a success story? Not yet. Not by a long stretch.

The same, unfortunately, could be said of Pakistan, albeit for somewhat different reasons. Intriguingly, though, the latest threat to Pakistan comes Obama, not Osama.

No, they aren't related. Barack Obama is not, on the face of it, a terrorist. He certainly has no interest in harming the US. Yet he is not averse to the US doing unto others what he wouldn't under any circumstances have others do to America.

Next month, Obama will become only the third African-American since Reconstruction to win a seat in the US Senate, representing Illinois; his victory in the electoral race is taken for granted, given that he enjoys a lead of nearly 50 per cent over his ultra-conservative Republican rival.

Obama sprang to national attention when he delivered the keynote address at the Democratic convention in July. It was an eloquent speech, couched in catch-alls that enabled progressives as well as conservatives to claim him as their own, and it led to speculation that his star would shine all the way to the White House.

That may be premature hype, but it lends a certain edge to the

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One of the much ballyhooed side-effects of the invasion was the liberation of Afghan women. Writing in the *New Internationalist* earlier this year, a member of the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) noted that outside Kabul and a few other cities, schooling for girls and jobs for women remain a dream.

"Women cannot take a taxi or walk unless accompanied by a close male relative," she wrote. "If seen with men who are not close relatives, women can be arrested by the 'special police' and forced to undergo a hospital examination to see if they have recently had intercourse. Because of this continued oppression, every month a large number of girls commit suicide — many more than under the Taliban."

Referring to areas under the control of the Northern Alliance, *she quoted an NGO worker as*

telling Amnesty International: "During the Taliban era, if a woman went to market and showed an inch of flesh, she would have been flogged; now she's raped."

Perhaps the most serious implicit indictment of the situation in Afghanistan came in July, when Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) decided to withdraw from the country. In the 33 years since the organization was founded, such an action was unprecedented. What's more, MSF had been operating in Afghanistan for 24 years: during the Soviet occupation and the civil war that followed, as well as under the Taliban.

It felt obliged to pull out after five of its workers were killed, not only because of the deaths but because it felt the Americans were deliberately blurring the boundaries between occupation forces and aid organizations. Furthermore, although it acknowledged the danger posed by the Taliban, MSF had cause to believe that forces allied to a local warlord were responsible for the five deaths, yet the authorities refused to pursue the probable perpetrators.

Other aid agencies have raised

who have evidently had the opportunity to regroup because American forces could not be deployed in sufficient numbers, since Iraq was considered a more important prize.

However, paucity of troops isn't by any means the only problem. The tendency to shoot first and ask questions later poses a bigger quandary. Late last month, for instance, a medical patrol in a remote village heard gunshots and mortar fire. The troops rushed to a nearby valley and saw two figures scurrying away in the distance. A shot in the air and a verbal warning produced no results, so the soldiers opened fire. The guns barked and the bullets found their marks. The "enemies" fell in their tracks.

They turned out to be a pair of brothers. The older one had been shot in the leg. He was 12. His 10-year-old sibling wasn't so lucky. He took a bullet in the

head. The US army described it as a "tragic accident". The bereaved father wasn't convinced. "A mistake is shooting one person," he said. "Not two ... If they are shooting our children, how can we be their friends?"

A good question. If it hasn't been put to Karzai during the election campaign, that's partly because he hasn't been campaigning much. Nor have any of his 17 rivals. Karzai strictly limited his excursions after an assassination attempt two years ago. He doesn't go anywhere without a posse of US-funded "private security consultants", but remains an endangered species. And it isn't easy to see how a dubious mandate at the weekend will improve his level of protection.

Dubious mandate? Well, the BBC reported a couple of weeks ago that 300 elders of the Terezyay tribe in Khost had publicly announced that the houses of any members of the tribe who didn't vote for Karzai would be burned down. And, even more troublingly, a presidential spokesman refused to condemn the threat.

Now, it may be unfair to extrapolate from this incident

tain edge to the circumstances in which Obama leapt into the international (or at least subcontinental) limelight. In an interview with the editors of the *Chicago Tribune* late last month, he said that if Iran's nuclear programme could not be tackled through UN-imposed sanctions, "surgical" air strikes by the US could prove to be the only remaining option. And Pakistan could expect the same, were General Musharraf to be replaced by an Islamist regime.

Now, the last thing Pakistan needs is fundamentalists at the helm — and, like any other country, it would be better off without its nuclear arsenal. Nor is Iran's apparent pursuit of nuclear weaponry justified. At the same time, the logic behind nuclear apartheid is racist. The US not only sits on enormous stockpiles, its leaders have publicly debated the pros and cons of developing nuclear devices

small enough to use in a war "theatre". And there's a streak of fundamentalism running through key figures in the Bush administration.

An anti-nuclear stance, whether global or regional, can be justified only if it's non-discriminatory. In the Middle Eastern context, it cannot exclude Israel. But perhaps the most disturbing aspect of Obama's outrageous outburst is the implication that Bush's doctrine of selective pre-emption has seeped through the American political consciousness and become all-pervasive.

A few days before he went on the record with his comments, Obama attended a meeting with members of the South Asian community where, in praising the candidate, Dr Naveed Musharraf — the president's brother — cited Martin Luther King's dream and John F. Kennedy's idealism. Obama himself cites King and Mahatma Gandhi as his major influences, alongside Abraham Lincoln. One can only wonder whether he has ever paused to think what the high priests of non-violence would make of his predilection for pre-emption.