

Karzai's new presidency *in New*

Afghanistan
7/1/04

The successful conclusion to this Saturday's presidential elections in Afghanistan is bound to be seen by many supporters of president Hamid Karzai as a significant new chapter in his political journey. Mr Karzai's sceptics, who have often questioned his democratic credentials, are bound to be left with relatively fewer criticisms, once he emerges with a fresh political mandate to preside over his country.

The very fact that Afghans would be getting their first chance to elect a president through the ballot box must be reassuring to many. In sharp contrast to their past legacy of settling disputes through the barrel of a gun, Afghans now have a chance to demonstrate, they are indeed capable of making difficult political choices, all through the ballot box.

Still, many sceptics would be eager to note such inadequacies in the electoral process as reports of tribal and other elders in different areas successfully preventing their women from registering as voters, or indeed the view that Afghanistan's future under Mr Karzai would be little different to how its been run under his watch, these past few years. The fact that his personal security staff hail from the US has often been used by his critics to denounce Mr Karzai as anyone but a homegrown leader. To make matters more complicated, Mr Karzai's backing by the US at a time when the Bush administration has overseen the worst slide in Washington's relations with the Muslim world can hardly go to the Afghan leader's credit.

While it would be difficult to ridicule an electoral process where a chunk of the public came out to vote, it also has to be said that Afghanistan is far from heading towards relative stability any time soon. To some extent, leaders such as US president George Bush must accept part of the responsibility for paying substantial lip service to the central Asian country, without indeed responding in a meaningful way to the reconstruction needs of

Afghanistan's widely dilapidated infrastructure and the economy. Here it has to be said

that as long as a large community of Afghans live in abject poverty, any effort to politically rebuild the central Asian state is bound to remain inconclusive at best and a demonstrable failure at worst.

Such a harsh proclamation may not be in sync with claims of success in stabilising Afghanistan, often heard from senior western officials in the past, most notably US officials. But it doesn't take an awful lot to figure out that the global assistance channelled in to Afghanistan since the New York terrorist attacks, has eventually not been sufficient to turn around the destiny of the badly war ravaged country.

The very fact that Afghanistan has become a far larger supplier of narcotics to the global drug market than under its former Taliban regime is a powerful reminder of the compelling view that people in distress often make desperate choices. To that end, the poorest of the poor involved as the proverbial foot soldiers in the drug trade perhaps have few choices other than peddling narcotics.

Mr Karzai's political comeback would hardly make a difference in an environment where even his personal movement around Afghanistan would remain restricted, giving ample ammunition to his critics to argue that he remains no more than the mere ruler of Kabul - the Afghan capital. He not only faces an acute security crisis as his opponents from the 'taliban' and members of 'Al Qaeda' continue to actively seek ways of toppling him.

More importantly, Afghanistan's journey towards even relative stability is bound to be hampered by questions over the ways in which issues such as the breakdown of social services and economic structures remain largely unchanged. Such economic rehabilitation is unlikely to make much progress, un-



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less Afghanistan's journey towards political consolidation with the backing of the United States takes place along with the support of its neighbours.

This week's reports quoting US officials, acknowledging that Pakistan has recently intensified its security operations along its border with Afghanistan in a more forceful way to curb militancy from the tribal areas, follow weeks of indications in Islamabad of increasing military activity in the region. Despite signs of increasing cooperation by Pakistan to support US military operations, the other key regional player - Iran, remains politically distant from Washington. Indeed, the recent tensions between the US and Iran over the latter's nuclear programme, must also undermine the prospects for these two countries to reach even a behind the scenes understanding on taking Afghanistan towards relative stability.

At the heart of the US-Iranian discord lies a recurring problem under Washington's Bush administration. The past three years, since the New York terrorist attacks, have seen the Bush administration try to steam roll itself through its self conceived foreign policy choices. In that pursuit, legitimate global forums, including the United Nations have been forced by the US to be sidelined as unilateralist based on the premise that might is right has become the more relevant factor in setting the pace for the future. In the process, relations between Washington and most countries of the world have been strained in different ways from simple underlying frictions to outright antagonism, all with varying degrees of anti-US sentiment shared by the public.

In Afghanistan too, Washington's failure to recognise that there is indeed a view other than simply forcing its policies through the barrel of a gun, indeed must eventually spell failure. The

groups of dissidents, be they remnants of Al Qaeda or the former 'taliban' rulers, have ample reason to rely upon support from the grass roots as they go about resisting US and Afghan forces.

There's no other way for a guerrilla type insurgency to have survived for the past three years since the downfall of Afghanistan's taliban regime, without an element of broad based public support. Indeed, this may also be a reminder of Afghanistan's complicated ethnicity, which in the past has often been a driver of militant trends. Mr Karzai, himself a 'pushtoon', ironically also represents a community whose interests have been occasionally marginalised as Afghanistan has come out of its hold of 'talibaan' and on to a new reality of a relatively multi-ethnic government. Once again, the elections have exposed ethnicity as a major factor in deciding politics as candidates from rival backgrounds have been subjected to pressures from their communities. In the end, if Mr Karzai's upcoming victory is partially the result of his 'pushtoon' credentials, many of his rivals from smaller ethnic communities are bound to have tribal supporters rally around them.

In this complicated background, the very fact that a super power such as the United States with all its military might has failed to rein in the militants, highlights the extent to which anti-Washington forces in Afghanistan have found the basis to prosper, notwithstanding the military success in one little skirmish or another.

In contrast to the relief that is bound to be seen in Washington after Mr Karzai's electoral victory, Afghanistan's cold reality remains that Saturday's polls are unlikely to lead the country towards greater instability. Indeed, if anything, the elections must only underline the wide gaps that hover around Afghanistan's future outlook despite Washington's best efforts to turn it in to a story demonstrating a successful end to Mr Bush's controversial foreign policy.