

Afghanistan needs Karzai

Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai has by no means been a democratic entrant into the Afghan political scene, yet even his harshest critics will have to concede him wisdom and astuteness. Parachuted into the presidential slot as a consequence of the December 2001 Bonn Agreement, Karzai is merely 100 hours away from becoming Afghanistan's first democratically elected President. He is the 'assured winner' from amongst a total of 18 candidates, including Afghan commanders, a professor, a poet and a woman, contesting in the elections. In his almost three years as Afghanistan's transitional President Karzai, living under constant threat to his life, has successfully convinced large sections of the Afghan people looking for personal and economic security that he is more than just an American 'puppet'. He also enjoys support of Afghanistan's neighbouring countries and is widely acknowledged as the man to lead Afghanistan's reform and reconstruction in the coming years.

There are indeed many questions linked to the 'fairness' of the October 9 presidential elections. These range from the use of state resources for Karzai's campaigning, the forcible removal of Karzai's key opponent Ismail Khan, as Governor of Herat and the double registration of voters from known pro-Karzai constituencies. According to the UN estimates 9.5 million people were eligible to vote, but 10.5 million have registered, which indicates in some cases double voter registration. The voting exercise in Afghanistan's far-flung areas to be conducted by scarcely equipped and mildly monitored 22,000 polling stations will also not be bungling-proof. In some cases transmitting results from polling stations, despite the election infrastructure that includes 5000 mobile phones, 114,000 local staff, 1150 Russian jeeps and 300 donkeys, could take days. There could be reasons to worry about the 'fairness' of the election.

Afghans have witnessed anything but a genuine election campaign. Posters, not political rallies, have dominated the campaign. In fact major security concerns made political rallies virtually non-existent. After being attacked during the September 16 helicopter trip to Gardez Karzai has opted for virtual 'house arrest' inside his excessively US guarded presidential compound. Only three days before the election, Karzai held a closing 5000 strong heavily guarded election rally in Kabul's football stadium.

Other context-related shortcomings, which critics argue would prevent the election from being a fair one, include the fact that the success of a US installed man now supported by virtually the entire western world is a foregone conclusion. The control of warlords over 85 per cent of Afghanistan is also seen as major hurdle to the free exercise of peoples' right to cast their vote. A strong possibility of major attacks from political forces opposed to Karzai and the Americans, whether warlords or some Taliban, does exist. Naturally given Afghanistan's almost three decade long political, social and security mayhem, elements like fraud, intimidation and violence will in varying degrees effect the October 9 presidential elections.



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All these assertions are perhaps valid. Yet, the continuation of Hamid Karzai as Afghanistan's president will be equally valid. This validity flows from four facts peculiar to the current Afghan situation. One, that Afghanistan, a war ravaged country for almost a quarter of a century does not have genuine conditions for operationalising democracy overnight. In terms of prioritisation of national tasks, the primary requirement to build a stable, strong and prosperous Afghanistan would be putting a state system built on sound institutions in place. Karzai, supported by the UN and the G-8 has been pursuing this objective. Just as the US led international community has been keen to develop democratic institutions.

Karzai has yet to emerge as a nation-wide popular leader in a nation which still is busy trying to deal with the 'basics' of existence, including physical security, clean water and two meals a day. Yet, he has become a symbol of Afghanistan's transition from crisis and chaos towards gradual peace and progress. Indeed very gradual. It is a requirement of this gradual process that Karzai goes through the presidential elections to legitimise himself as an elected Afghan leader and not one propped up entirely by the Americans

Two, for a state and society involved principally in the task of reconstruction, the presence of a strong leader is a fundamental requirement. Karzai's track record amply demonstrates his capabilities as a strong leader. From the ravages of bitter civil strife, Karzai has emerged as a national figure on the Afghan political scene. His American backing is mainly responsible for keeping him in office, yet in his own right Karzai is recognised in Afghanistan as a political leader who has the potential to build bridges among the warring factions. Afghans have seen Karzai successfully divide the Northern Alliance and win over support from a sizeable portion of it, as well as establish political links with certain sections of the former Taliban leadership. Karzai has gone on record to say that only about 100 Taliban involved in ruling Afghanistan can be categorised as criminals, while others are innocent and should be re-integrated into the Afghan scene.

Three, Afghanistan with no history of any

institutionalised democratic form of government will have to evolve into a democratic political entity. In the initial formative period of any system it would be incorrect to hold the system up to rigorous standards. Afghanistan has still done well as a country with zero tradition of democracy. Starting from scratch, Afghanistan today has a million registered voters and 11 candidates contesting for the presidential slot.

Four, while recognising that Afghanistan's current security situation is far less satisfactory than what is desirable, there is also a realisation that the major onus for perpetuating insecurity and instability is on the Afghan warlords. The people of Afghanistan, as was demonstrated by their representatives in the almost month long Loya Jirga, recognise that security can return to Afghanistan through a strong centre led by a strong president. Clearly a strong president also requires a strong state apparatus, which has monopoly over coercive yet accountable state power to maintain law and order in society. State power in Afghanistan for now is almost non-existent. Karzai depends on US and NATO forces largely to confront, where possible, elements challenging Kabul's power. These power contenders range from warlords to poppy growing farmers. For as long as the Afghan state is unable to develop its own the apparatus of force, whether police, militia or army, it must rely on outside forces. To this extent the average Afghan understands Karzai's need to work with foreign forces.

Five, Karzai backed by the US and other western powers, is viewed by Afghanistan's neighbours as a stabilising force for Afghanistan and for its neighbourhood. Pakistan and Iran, the two principal countries who suffered the fallout of Afghan turmoil and also got involved, at varying degrees, in Afghanistan's anti-Soviet resistance have engaged with Karzai in Kabul. Under Karzai, Pakistan-Afghan relations have vastly improved in the areas of trade, commerce and security cooperation.

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Karzai needs both outside support and internal go-ahead to be a successful transition man for Afghanistan. Also to continue as president being elected is not sufficient. Karzai also needs to be lucky against the constant security threats he faces.