

# Pre-poll Afghan scenario

*Afghanistan  
Dawn  
17/8/04*

IF not postponed, Afghanistan's presidential election in October is likely to be tough and closely fought. President Hamid Karzai's success can no longer be taken for granted, for the country's ethnic mix seems to be working against him. He belongs to the Pakhtoon community, which is Afghanistan's largest. But other communities — Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmans, and Hazaras — taken together constitute a majority. More important, Mr Karzai comes from southern Afghanistan, where the Taliban still enjoy considerable influence. For that reason, the Pakhtoos are not likely to vote en bloc for him. He also is looked upon as an American loyalist. This weakens his moral position. Worse still, there is nothing positive for Mr Karzai to show to his people.

The law and order situation continues to be precarious and the central government's writ does not run beyond Kabul and Kunduz. The Taliban still retain the capacity to carry out acts of terrorism, especially in the southern region, while banditry too is rampant. Many aid agencies have suspended their operations because their workers are kidnapped and killed. This has also adversely affected the pace of rehabilitation and reconstruction. Nearly three million Afghan refugees have returned home, but economic opportunities for them are extremely limited. It is a measure of the situation in Afghanistan that the only way in which the people have gained economically is through the opium trade. When in power, the Taliban were ruthless when it came to poppy cultivation. But the post-Taliban period has seen a boom in poppy production, with Afghanistan having become the world's largest supplier of poppy and heroin. An estimate puts the volume of poppy trade at 2.3 billion dollars annually. One

reason for the poppy boom is the existence of powerful warlords, who are a law unto themselves. The Karzai government has little control over them. They maintain powerful militias which not only defy the Kabul government but also keep fighting against each other. Two of the warlords — Uzbek general Rashid Dostum and Hazara chief Mohammad Mohaqeq — are also among the 18 candidates for the October 9 election. This is against election rules, which forbid anyone having militias to take part in any election. The existence of powerful militia also means people could be intimidated into voting for the warlord of a given area.

The biggest challenge to Mr Karzai now comes from Mr Yunus Qanuni. He is a minister in Mr Karzai's cabinet but he maintains a well-armed militia of 5,000 in the capital city. His position received a boost recently when Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah and Defence Minister Qasim Fahim, both Tajiks, announced their support for him. This means most voters in the north will vote for Mr Qanuni, while the Pakhtoon belt stands divided. Another awkward fact is that even though Mr Karzai is America's man, Washington is grateful to the Northern Alliance for its cooperation with it in the war against Taliban. This should have a bearing on the outcome of the polls. The chances are that no candidate will get more than 50 per cent of votes, in which case there maybe a run-off in which Mr Karzai may emerge victorious. But, at the moment, the Tajik-dominated central government seems to have tipped the scales in Mr Qanuni's favour. Should Mr Qanuni be elected president, it is doubtful if the Pakhtoon community will accept him as president. The result could be continued instability and bloodshed in Afghanistan.