

Although due to the situation in Iraq Afghanistan has gone into the background and almost out of the news but the situation in this Central Asian state, the first country targeted in the war against terror, is not stable even after the ouster of Taliban and the installation of a pro-US government.

Earlier, Soviet Union fought in the country against the unified force of Mujahadeen supported by the US and its allies. This time, however, the war is among the former allies - US versus Taliban and Al-Qaeda - and the situation is quite different. This may give the impression that the Afghans are united while fighting against foreign aggressors, but even a cursory look reveals differences and fragmentation in the Afghan society across the board.

After the overthrow of Zahir Shah no Afghan government has gained the consensus and agreement of the Afghan society in general on the system and the form of the government. Every government relied on coercion, use of force and the exclusion of the opponents from the power system and thus tried to bring the opponents to its own terms. The continuous civil war has made the country such a black hole which not only attracted and sucked the energies of the regional countries but at last involved the only superpower of the world in its affairs.

Division and fragmentation has reached the level that nothing is clear - no one wants to trust others. Force has become the only means to gain a share in the power. All kinds of tribal

Afghanistan elections

Afghanistan 2/9/04

BY RAUF NIZAMANI

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bonds based on the blood and race and the political and ideological relations have taken a back seat. The intensity of this division may be gauged from the fact that even the return of Zahir Shah did not bring any improvement in the situation. This is also true of the present government supported by the US and allied forces which has not only failed to gain control in the areas outside Kabul where various warlords have set-up their mini-states independent of the control of government in Kabul, but is itself plagued by many problems and is divided against itself.

The government has not succeeded in restoring law and order and the civic facilities in the country. Even the capital is in ruins. Roads are in a bad condition and electricity is provided only to the 30% of the population of the city. Corruption has become rampant and a major part of the aid is pocketed by the officials, ministers and other government functionaries.

Apart from this, it has also failed in curbing the opium production which is the main source of finance for the warlords and also a major concern of the western world. A recent report of UNO shows that in 2003 the drug production in the country generated about \$2.3 billion. The report further stated that Afghanistan was the source for 90% of heroin supplied in the Eu-

ropean streets and 75% in the world. Echoing this concern US Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, on his recent visit to the Afghan capital, stated that if this situation is not controlled there is every possibility for the country to be turned into a failed narco-state.

In this situation the presidential elections will be held on 19th Oct 2004. President Ahmed Karzai and 17 other candidates are contesting in these polls. This is not a walkover or smooth sailing for Karzai. Because presently there is no Afghan leader who may claim the support of all the people of the country. Identification of the various leaders is not their political/ideological credentials but their ethnic identification.

And the elections instead of narrowing have sharpened these differences. This may be seen even in the case of present government. Karzai has chosen the brother of former commander Ahmed Shah Masood as his Vice-President and not one of his Uzbek/Tajik allies as was predicted.

The Nation

This has forced the allies to field their own candidate Younas Qanooni who may give a tough fight to Karzai.

Although according to the election rules those who maintain some private army or militia are not eligible for contesting the polls, but most of the candidates are warlords whose purpose is not to win the elections but to get for themselves some concessions and privileges. Among these warlords the prominent are Mahaqiq and Rashid Dostum. At present the main activity of these candidates is negotiations for bargaining and to cut deals instead of going to the common people for votes.

The main purpose of these first ever elections in the history of the country is to restore the writ of the government in the different areas of the country which, at present, are in the control of various warlords who are collecting taxes from the people on the basis of force. Thus the main demand of the warlords, in return for their support to Karzai, is to allow them to maintain their militias and rule over these areas.

At present Karzai is of the view that this issue is not negotiable. Because this would defeat the whole purpose of the elections and the reforms in the country. These warlords and private militias are the main threat to the integrity and stability of the country.

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Recently a survey, conducted by 12 aid groups of Afghanistan, showed that the majority of the population see these militias as a bigger threat than either the Taliban or Al-Qaeda. Therefore, if Karzai, just to secure his position, makes any compromise on this issue the situation in the country would further deteriorate.

Various observers are of the view that the Afghans are quite Enthusiastic about the forth coming polls and many have registered themselves twice. Thus the total number of the registered voters has slightly exceeded the total number of voters of 9.9 million.

However, this seems an exaggeration as some reports have shown that due to the influence of Taliban and the war-like situation in the country a large number of Pushtun population has not got themselves registered as voters. It is possible that various warlords and other candidates and their supporters had inflated the numbers by registering fake voters - the dead and also the people who have migrated from the country.

Elections have created new contradictions and opened old wounds in Afghanistan. Apart from the threat of Taliban to disrupt the elections there are also fears that various interested groups who have vested interests in the present situation may also create problems and may push the country to further bloodshed and anarchy. Therefore, it may be said that these elections would determine the future course of the country. But it is difficult to predict the nature of such a course.

Email: raufnizamani@hotmail.com