

The more it remains the same

Afghanistan

Danu

23/9/04

By Dr Iffat Idris

REMEMBER Afghanistan? The country that shot into the international spotlight in the immediate aftermath of 9/11; the first battle zone in the 'war on terror'; the first (according to George Bush) victory in that war — remember?

One could not be blamed for having forgotten it. The war on terror has moved on: Iraq, Indonesia, the Middle East — these new fronts have eclipsed it from international consciousness. Afghanistan, in the words of one commentator, is the day before yesterday's story.

But Afghanistan is suddenly back in the headlines. Elections for the office of president are to be held on October 9. Incumbent Hamid Karzai is standing with 17 other hopefuls — one of them a woman. Millions of Afghans have registered to vote — including many women. After decades of war and misrule, the country stands poised on the brink of democratic government. Little wonder George Bush has suddenly remembered it.

Whatever the outcome of October poll, one can be sure that Bush (and co-warrior Blair) will be trumpeting their role in bringing democracy to the long-deprived Afghans. The very fact that an election is being held — in which people can register, vote, express their wishes — will be bandied about as a supreme achievement of the war on terror. 'This could never happen under the Taliban', we will be told, and 'Afghanistan has been brought into the free world.' With US presidential elections around the corner, boasting about Afghanistan is a dead certainly.

The world forgot Afghanistan: its attention shifted elsewhere. Had it not, it would know that Afghanistan has not been following the golden democratic path George Bush and the Republicans would have us believe. Had it not, it would know that the Afghanistan story is far from reaching a happy ending.

What has been happening in that country? Elections are to be held: — the next stage in the establishment of a fully Afghan, democratic government (earlier stages being the Loya Jirga and the interim administration of Hamid Karzai). Millions of voters have indeed registered. But there is a wider context that belies the rosy picture painted by these 'facts'.

The wider context is that the Karzai government, 'currently ruling' Afghanistan, is doing practically nothing. The writ of that government does not extend beyond the capital Kabul. The president depends on Americans for his personal security. His first attempt in almost two years to leave the capital and visit the provinces, including Gardez where he escaped an assassination attempt, almost

women are 'free' there are an awful lot still covering their faces — not for Islam but to escape predatory stares.

America had landed its troops to oust the Taliban. It has troops to continue the futile (so far) search for Osama bin Laden along the border with Pakistan. It has 130,000 troops in Iraq. But neither Washington nor the rest of the world has troops to provide security to the people of Afghanistan: to protect them from the terror of the warlords. For the Bush administration those warlords are allies — 'co-fighters' against the Taliban. They are also an easy solution to the problem of how to fill the post-Taliban power vacuum. Small details like the thousands they have killed or the abuses they continue to perpetrate can be ignored.

Medecins Sans Frontieres managed to work in Afghanistan for 24 years: through the long civil war, through the Taliban government. But this year MSF pulled out — the murder of five of its workers made staying impossible. Many other NGOs and aid agencies have done the same. 'Liberated' Afghanistan is a dangerous place to be helping the needy.

Those 'needy' are numerous. When the war on terror moved on and forgot Afghanistan, it forgot the promised billions in international reconstruction assistance. Now the aid agencies have all but gone; the 'central government' has nothing — and the people of Afghanistan can only reflect on more broken promises.

The much vaunted elections are to take place in this shattered, landscape. It is no surprise that they have become tainted by it: 30 election workers have already been killed (part of the 1,000 killed in the past twelve months). Voting will take place in villages and towns far from Kabul, controlled by the warlords where both the 'central government' and international observers fear to tread. The Taliban

Afghanistan has reverted to pre-Taliban warlordism: the country has become a collection of fiefdoms run by the likes of Dostum, Ismail Khan and Muhammed Fahim. They are the ones with the armies and weapons — not the 'central government'

sonal security. His first attempt in almost two years to leave the capital and visit the provinces, including Gardez where he escaped an assassination attempt, almost became his last in this world. Karzai's is a government on props: held up by the US and its allies because it is far better to maintain a facade of Afghan 'central rule' than admit the truth.

What is the truth? That Afghanistan has reverted to pre-Taliban warlordism: the country has become a collection of fiefdoms run by the likes of Abdur Rashid Dostum, Ismail Khan and (sitting in Kabul itself) Muhammed Fahim. They are the ones with the armies and weapons — not the 'central government'. They are the ones with the money (millions from drugs, smuggling and crime) — not the cash-strapped central government. 'Liberated' Afghanistan has regained its position as the world's leading opium producer. The warlord's gun is once again the law of the land.

The first casualty in such a government-less, lawless environment is always security. 'Liberated' Afghanistan is a far more dangerous place than it was under the Taliban. True, you won't get beaten for not having a beard or not wearing a burqa — but given the heightened risks of murder, robbery and rape, you could well feel short-changed. For a country in which

weapons — not the 'central government'.

— growing stronger by the day — are using blatant intimidation tactics to undermine the poll. Can anyone honestly call this an exercise in democracy? Can anyone honestly feel optimistic about the future?

The irony of all ironies, the Taliban are coming back. The war on terror has failed to find Osama or to curb Al Qaeda's killing frenzy. But it has even failed to crush the Taliban. Amid the bloodshed and killing by the warlords, one also sees the bloodshed and killing of the Taliban — with ordinary Afghans the victims of both.

Read the story of today's Afghanistan and you will find much that is familiar: much that reminds one of Afghanistan in the early 1990s. That Afghanistan was also forgotten by the international community — also after a period in the limelight (the Soviet occupation). That Afghanistan was also blighted by warlordism, crime and drugs. That Afghanistan was also desperate and impoverished. That Afghanistan became a breeding ground for terrorism. Is today's Afghanistan really any different?

iffatidris2000@yahoo.co.uk