

Pak-Afghan dialogue: future problems and prospects

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It appears to a proverbial lull before the storm. Kabul is a city without a soul and its inhabitants appear to be in a state of perpetual fatigue, mere onlookers as the great game continues. Liberators or occupation forces? Afghans today see the coalition forces as a strong line of defence in the face of civil war, and no one is in a hurry to see them depart. However, there was not a single Afghan who was prepared to defend the Taliban and so, today they see these foreign 'defenders' as those who 'saved' them twice. First from the Soviet Union and then from the Taliban.

You come face to face with destruction the moment you drive out of Kabul airport, and together with an occupation force armed to the teeth, which watches silently, it becomes an unnerving sight if you have stepped in from a free country.

"How do you feel?", I ask an Afghan as he steps out of the aircraft, returning home after 25 years. "Absolutely numb", he replies. Every day sees more and more educated and professionally qualified Afghans returning to Kabul unlike the millions of refugees who have nothing to return to.

On the roads, in contrast to nearly every building having been hit by bullets, missiles and rockets, are only the stunning and fragrant roses of Kabul, lining the roads, growing in gay abundance in homes and offices under the summer sun, holding a promise and hope that beauty, peace and tranquillity will arise again from the soil of Afghanistan.

"All we say to our neighbours is please support us in how we conduct our policies and respect us for it, and you would be welcome. But if you disagree please don't interfere and we will respect you for that", says Professor Gul Rahman Qazi, who heads the Department of Law and Political Science at the National Centre for Policy Research (NCPR) at Kabul University.

He is part of the first Pak-Afghan dialogue looking at Problems and Prospects for the Future. This is the brainchild of and sponsored by the Hanns Seidel Foundation and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation of Germany, which brought Islamabad's Institute of Strategic Studies and the National Centre for Policy Studies face to face last week in Kabul.

The parameters for the dialogue were set in the first session, when hosts NCPR discouraged criticism of US policies around the world particularly inside Afghanistan. "Let us not condemn third forces but rather start condemning ourselves and try to fathom where the irritants lie and how we can overcome them", said Prof M Akbar Popal, Chancellor of Kabul University and Director NCPR, who felt that the answers had to come from within. Popal has no interest in hard politics as he spends his days and nights in bringing some semblance of credibility to the University, which is thriving not only with students but also with new departments set up by foreign donors. People like Popal are the new leaders, in the forefront of the fight for intellectual reconstruction, anxious to make up for time lost.

Today Afghanistan has 20,000 coalition troops in addition to the 6,400 strong International Security Assistance Force.

Also not open for discussion at the dialogue were the Pakistani prisoners in Afghan jails, though Afghan voices sent out a fervent appeal to Islamabad to come up with a list of Afghan prisoners in Pakistan jailed for drug related crimes and the Vienna Convention was cited.

This was indeed a much needed dialogue where a format was provided and a need was felt to move away from the 'stated positions' and try and understand the other view in the fast changing geo-strategic realities and if there were some issues too 'sensitive' to be discussed, then this was after all, only the beginning of the dialogue.

The war on terror and securing stability in the region saw Dr Shireen Mazari stressing the need to have a more constructive process to deal with security issues and the need to persuade the US that they have to alter their psyche on al-Qaeda and stop their revengeful approach and adopt a more rational outlook on human lives in the region. She questioned the liberation of Afghanistan

by the US when as a consequence it impinged on the sovereignty of Pakistan.

The setting for the dialogue was the Intercontinental Hotel where the savageries of the Taliban was a daily and cruel reminder of how one had as yet also not understood the Taliban's 'psyche'. In the main dining area all figures on the wall, specially replicas of the Bamiyan Buddha, were chiselled out cruelly. It appears this was one of the first things the Taliban did when they 'liberated' Kabul and entered the hotel.

So there were no surprises when the Afghans at the dialogue gave vent to their feelings and saw the rise of terrorism under the Taliban, when continuing support came from those outside Afghanistan, who had 'invested' in these forces. In fact some even felt that with the recent rise in poppy growing, which meant Afghanistan providing three fourth of the world's opium in 2003, and millions of dollars exchanging hands, there is a strong possibility that Afghanistan, like in the past, would once again become the hub of terrorism. They even questioned if the Taliban had really got the country completely free of poppy towards the end of their rule, dismissing it as propaganda.

Consensus emerged on intelligence sharing between officials on both sides through the internet to stop the crossing over of drug traffickers.

Even if the voters' lists are not complete, it appears that elections will take place anyway with no one shying away from saying that it is being hurried to please the White House. But if voting ever took place to find the most popular Afghan, it would be the Lion of Pansher that would win hands down

That the US continues to pay hefty sums to the warlords, who may have interest in the Kabul government, is questionable. More so when most of the poppy cultivated is under their command. With most of the heroin ending up inside European borders, there is little interest for the US to see these red flowers of destruction bloom in face of their political aims.

"You stop giving Taliban safe sanctuaries inside your borders, and the unrest will disappear overnight. It is only the help and support from Pakistan that sees them trying to keep Afghanistan unstable," said Sibgittullah Mujjadidi, weakened politically but still a highly respected religious leader, however, who most say stands no chance if elections are held. He was speaking at a dinner thrown by Pakistan's soft spoken ambassador Rustum Mohmand which had attracted the entire diplomatic community

in Kabul.

Others in private meetings said that lack of leadership in the Taliban, dwindling resources and lack of clear political objectives, apart from creating instability will not give them any great gains. There appeared to be a voice of sympathy by some Pashtuns that the areas under the Taliban, where the majority were Pashtuns lived, was successfully dewatered of large arms and now with coalition forces bombarding them nearly every night, the morale is certainly low.

"The main reason why there are no big insurgencies inside Afghanistan today is that there are no safe sanctuaries inside Pakistan. A few may try to attempt to cross over but certainly no big scale opportunities like when the Soviets were here," he says. But perceptions are stronger than the truth and the ruined and burnt Pakistan mission, lying in ruins, is a cruel reminder that this time at least, Islamabad should resist temptation and stay away while the Afghans decide their future.

"We cannot understand why some countries are sympathetic to a group of extremists that has declared war on peace and prosperity in Afghanistan," says Professor M Musa Maroofi who has returned from Kabul.

Even if the voters' lists are not complete, it appears that elections will take place anyway with no one shying away from saying that it is being hurried to please the White House. But if voting ever took place to find the most popular Afghan, it would be the Lion of Pansher that would win hands down. With his wrinkled brows under a brown Chitrali cap, at an angle on the back of his head, which became legendary with this commander, Ahmed Shah Masood posters are all over the capital, some even woven into carpets. Long buried in rugged mountains, today, even Hamid Karzai pales in significance with the love and respect that Masood is revered with.

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