

# Crushing Democracy in Afghanistan

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On May Day Afghan President Hamid Karzai filed his papers with the country's Independent Election Commission, formally declaring that he is going to stand for re-election. The presidential election has been set for August 20, 2009. What surprised the western media were his choices for vice president and deputy vice president.

Running on Karzai's ticket will be Mohammad Qasum Fahim, one of the most notorious warlords in Afghan history. He has been accused by Human Rights Watch and other organizations of human rights abuses as a mujahideen commander in the war against the leftist government and the Soviets in the 1980s and then during the bloody civil war of the Islamists between 1992 and 1996. A prominent Tajik, he was a military commander for the Northern Alliance in the 2001 conflict, served as minister of defence in Karzai's regime and then as vice president. Until April 2009 he was a prominent member of the National United Front, the opposition coalition which dominates the Afghan parliament. He retains his militia groups and is widely accused of corruption, trafficking in narcotics and other criminal activities.

Also on the ticket is Muhammad Karim Khalili from Hazarajat, a prominent Harzara Shi'ite. Presently serving as the second vice president, Khalili is a well known warlord and long time head of the Whadat party, with strong support from Iran. During the civil war he was also accused of human rights abuses. Like Fahim, he maintains a sizeable militia and until recently was a member of the National United Front.

Karzai has demonstrated that the old system of patriarchal tribal politics is still deeply entrenched in the new Afghanistan. He convinced Gul Aga Sherzai to stand down as a presidential candidate. A prominent Pashtun warlord from the period of the civil war, Sherzai has also been accused of human rights violations. Karzai had appointed him as governor of Nangahar Province. A favourite of Washington, Barack Obama had stopped to visit Sherzai in July 2008 during a trip to Afghanistan by members of the U.S. Congress.

## A divided and weakened opposition

Karzai appears to have locked up the presidential election. The Economist reported in early May that private polling found his support stood at only 15%, but the opposition to him is badly divided. The main opposition was expected to come from the United National Front, which has dominated the Afghan parliament. Their candidate, Abdullah Abdullah, the former Foreign Minister and prominent mujahideen leader, registered on May 6. In order to have a chance of defeating Karzai, Abdullah must build an alliance with Pashtun tribal elders. The deadline for registration was May 8, but coalitions can be formed after this date.

However, an incredible 44 people have registered to run for the office of president, including two women. This reflects the failure of the political system that the U.S. government and its

allies foisted on Afghanistan after 2001.

The real alternative to the old tribal and ethnic politics comes from the National Democratic Front, an alliance of 13 political parties. The parties of the NDF support a process of peace to end the current conflict and have a strong commitment to expanding democracy, human rights and liberal, constitutional government. They are opposed to the Islamist agenda and prefer a secular state as under the 1964 Constitution.

However, since 2003 political parties have been prohibited from participating in elections, and they have a limited presence. The new democratic parties have been fearful of campaigning in public for the law now makes it illegal for political parties to oppose the holy religion of Islam. The Islamist forces, key allies of the U.S. government over the years, insist that secularism, as in Turkey, has no place in Afghanistan. As Thomas Ruttig pointed out in his comprehensive study of Afghan's political parties, the fundamental political division in Afghanistan is between those who want separation of church and state and the Islamists.

The mass media in North America rarely give any coverage to political events in Afghanistan. However, on April 22, 2009 the Globe and Mail (Toronto) carried a background piece on the potential Afghan candidates for president. Dr. Ramazan Bashardost was featured, identified as the "Obama of Afghanistan." He has a strong commitment to democracy, human rights and is an outspoken opponent of corruption. As minister of planning in the Karzai government, he criticized the dominant presence of foreign non-government organizations, their corrupting influence, and proposed that 1,900 be expelled from the country. When Karzai rejected his proposal, he resigned from the government and won a seat in the legislature. He has a major following among Afghan youth, and a majority of the population is under 25.

Unfortunately, Bashardost is a Hazara leader. As such, given the political system fostered on Afghanistan by the U.S. government, he has little chance of being elected. If there were political parties involved in election campaigns, he would be part of a national movement rather than identified simply as a member of a minority ethnic group and a minority religious faction. Based on his public record, he already has a solid following in many areas of the country.

#### The constitution and the election

Under the present constitution, the end of the presidential term is May 21, 2009. An election is required within 30 to 60 days of the end of the president's term. However, the U.S. government and NATO took the position that the present Afghan government would be unable to hold an election in the spring and that they would not be able to guarantee security in all areas of the country. The Independent Election Commission (IEC), appointed by Karzai, then chose to bypass the constitution and set the date of the election for August 20.

The opposition United National Front then proposed that an interim president be named to hold office between the end of Karzai's term and the election. This was rejected by the IEC. The Afghan Supreme Court, also appointed by the president, then ruled that Karzai could stay on as president until the election was completed. Opposition parties objected, noting that this was not only unconstitutional it also gave Karzai an enormous advantage over all other candidates. There are already protests against the way government officials are working for Karzai's re-election. The postponement of the presidential election had the support of U.S. and NATO governments.

## U.S. policy in Afghanistan

The United States has long been involved in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. Aside from foreign aid, political interference began during the Cold War. It is now widely known that in July 1979 the U.S. government began funding the Islamist mujahideen, which were beginning an armed rebellion against the leftist government of the Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PPDA). But few know that the U.S. government, via the CIA and its front organization, the Asian Foundation, had in 1970 begun to finance the militant Islamist movement at Kabul University. The U.S. government as early as the 1950s was financing and supporting the radical Islamist movement in an effort to undermine the Marxist, socialist, nationalist and anti-imperialist movements in the Muslim world. The CIA funded and armed Islamist groups which tried to instigate rebellions in the Soviet Central Asian Republics, deemed to be the “soft underbelly” of the Soviet federation.

President Jimmy Carter formally proclaimed U.S. policy in January 1980, following the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Unimpeded access to oil resources in the Persian Gulf was deemed to be a “vital interest” and the U.S. government would use all means at its disposal, including its vast military machine, to protect those interests. This was the justification for the major intervention in Afghanistan in support of the militant Islamist forces.

Little has changed since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The United States has greatly increased its military presence in the Middle East; its naval forces control all the seas in the region. Following the discovery of significant oil and gas resources in the Caspian Sea area, the U.S. presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia increased. Policy goals were broadened to include attempts to secure U.S. corporate control of these new oil and gas resources, have the oil and gas shipped to Europe and the west without passing through Russia or Iran, and build pipelines from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to the Arabian Sea.

The U.S. government hoped that its clients in Afghanistan, the mujahideen Islamist warlords, would be able to provide a stable government after the collapse of the leftist regime in 1992. But they became bogged down in a brutal civil war. The UNOCAL-led oil and gas consortium negotiated pipeline deals, but construction could not proceed because of the chaotic political situation.

Thus it was no surprise that UNOCAL and the U.S. government were among the early supporters of the Taliban rebellion. It was hoped that this new Islamist movement would be able to form a stable government and the pipelines could be built. Once in office, however, the Taliban dragged their feet. The Six-Plus-Two negotiations, begun in the fall of 1997 and brokered by the United Nations, were unsuccessful. The Taliban was unwilling to broaden their government to include other Afghan political elements. The Bush administration finally broke off these negotiations in July 2001 and began preparing for an invasion and regime change, scheduled to begin in October.

## The necessity of regime change

In October 2001 President George W. Bush, with the strong support of the Democrats in the Congress, launched a devastating military attack on Afghanistan. The goal was not to arrest Osama bin Laden and his small group of Islamists and bring them to trial for fomenting 9/11. From the beginning it was to overthrow the Taliban regime and replace it with one favourable to the U.S. government and its policy objectives. This was accomplished in a very short order. Their allies were the Northern Alliance, the remnants of the brutal Islamist

government of 1992-1996.

The next order of business was the creation of a neo-colony with a compliant, dependent government. This was to take the form of a liberal state – not a democratic state. The U.S. government insisted that there was to be a presidential system of government with a strong, centralized concentration of power. The only precedent for this in Afghan history was the dictatorship created by Mohammad Daoud Khan, who seized power in a bloodless coup in 1973. In 1977 Daoud proclaimed a new constitution with a strong presidency and a one party system led by himself.

The new Afghan liberal state would have a constitution, regular elections, and a legal system created by a subordinate parliament. Most important, the new government was to be held to the neoliberal policies of the Washington Consensus: the free market, free trade, privatization of all state owned enterprises, and government deregulation. All natural resources would now be developed by the private sector, including foreign corporations. The implementation of the liberal state would be assisted by the administrative arm of the United Nations and the U.N.-affiliated financial organizations, all under U.S. political control.

The practical implementation of this regime change would be enabled by those “democracy promotion” organizations financed by the U.S. government: the National Endowment for Democracy, the Center for International Private Enterprise, the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems. Additional support came from the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening, which is financed by USAID.

#### The Bonn process

In November 2001 the U.S. government convened a conference in Bonn, Germany to create an interim government. They chose the delegates from Afghanistan. Five broad groups who had formed democratic political parties asked for representation: the Republican Party of Afghanistan, the Afghanistan Freedom and Democracy Movement, the People’s Party, the Council of Afghanistan’s Tribes, and the Alliance of Peace and Progress Fighters of Afghanistan. Their participation was vetoed by the U.S. government, and this set the tone for everything that followed.

In the first round of voting at Bonn for the chairman of the Interim Administration, the large majority of delegates voted for Abdul Satar Sirat, who represented the Afghans who wanted a constitutional monarchy as they had under the 1964 Constitution. The other votes went to Burhanaddin Rabbani, representing the Northern Alliance. Hamid Karzai, the candidate of the U.S. government, received no votes.

Time out was called. After threats and pressure from U.S. government and U.N. officials, on December 5 the representatives reluctantly agreed to accept Karzai as chairman of the Interim Administration. He then selected 30 people to head a new transitional administration, the large majority of whom were Islamist commanders from the Northern Alliance.

Following the terms of the Bonn Agreement, an Emergency Loya Jirga (grand council) was held in June 2002 to more formally chose an Interim President and a cabinet to govern until elections were held. A total of 1500 delegates were either locally chosen or appointed by Karzai, but the democratic parties were again excluded. Nevertheless, 900 signed a petition

requesting a parliamentary government based on the 1964 Constitution. The U.S. government vetoed this proposal. Delegates were then pressured by members of the Northern Alliance, as well as U.S. and U.N. officials. If they did not follow the path chosen by the U.S. government, there would be no U.S. money for reconstruction. Karzai was then chosen Interim President and formed a new interim government, again dominated by the radical Islamists and warlords, the allies of the U.S. government.

Next on the agenda was the adoption of a new constitution. The Northern Alliance Islamists opposed the 1964 Constitution because it had as its core the principle of separation of church and state and the defence of historic human and individual rights. The U.S. government wanted a highly centralized presidential system of government with Karzai in charge.

In stark contrast to the adoption of the 1964 Constitution, the U.S./Karzai process was held completely behind closed doors. The new draft constitution was never seen by the general public. There was no public debate. The draft was presented for approval to a special conference of 500 carefully selected delegates. Nevertheless, 48% of the delegates walked out in protest and refused to vote on the draft. No vote was taken, but Interim President Karzai proclaimed that it had been “adopted unanimously.” The U.S. and Canadian governments praised this “democratic process.”

#### Demonstration elections

The elections for President in October 2004 and for the Afghan parliament in September 2005 were deeply flawed. The main concern of Afghan liberals and democrats was the refusal of the U.S. government and Karzai to permit the participation of political parties. In the presidential election, Karzai won 55% of the vote, with strong support among the Pushtun communities, but he failed to win a majority in the areas of strength of the other ethnic groups. He had the support of the democrats who feared the election of one of the Islamist warlords. He was always the lesser evil.

The election for the new parliament was worse. While 34 political parties petitioned the government for an electoral system based on proportional representation, this was rejected. Instead, the U.S. government and President Karzai decreed the Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) system where only individuals could run for office and there would be no party identification or party lists. There were 2,800 candidates. Voter turnout for these elections was much lower, in Kabul only 30%. Voters were confronted by many candidates with no political identification.

The SNTV electoral system proved to be profoundly anti-democratic. As Andrew Reynolds points out, the winning candidates received just 2 million votes or 32% of the total. The losing candidates received 4.5 million votes or around two-thirds of the total.

The electoral law disqualified criminals, warlords, commanders and drug lords. However, only 11 candidates were disqualified for having links to armed groups. The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission reported that “more than 80% of winning candidates in the provinces and more than 60% in the capital Kabul have links to armed groups.” The Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit concluded that 133 of those elected to the Wolesi Jirga had fought in the mujahideen war. Islamist forces dominate both houses of the legislature. Only seven members of the National Democratic Front were elected.

The reality is that the Afghan legislature has very little credibility or legitimacy in the eyes of

most Afghan citizens. President Karzai is generally regarded as the front man for the U.S. government.

Afghans want democratic rights

It is often argued that as a very patriarchal Muslim country with a strong presence of militant Islamists there is limited support for democracy. Democracy can't work in a country where the majority of adults are illiterate.

However, this is just a rationalization for the U.S. imperial project in Afghanistan. In the period after World War II the country was moving steadily towards a constitutional democracy. The 1964 Constitution was every bit as democratic as the U.S. Constitution.

The public opinion surveys done by the Asia Foundation reveal a strong commitment of the majority of Afghans to personal freedom, peace, democratic government, and respect for a system of rights and laws. Large majorities support the principle of equal rights under the law, regardless of gender, ethnicity or religion. Two thirds of those surveyed in 2007 believe that there is no conflict between Islam and democracy. However, they also believe that democracy and freedom of speech are presently restricted by government and local political authorities.

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit recently conducted focus group discussions on Islam and democracy. There was general agreement that democracy means government by the people, where the rights of all are protected. Democracy includes the principles of greater equality, security, adequate food and health, and rights for women. There was also a general consensus that democracy does not exist in Afghanistan. There are only "slogans of democracy." Warlords have too much influence over government. There is no peace.

Conclusion

Contrary to the propaganda from the mass media, Afghanistan has a tradition of representative, constitutional democracy that goes back in history. Political parties were recognized under the 1964 Constitution. In the 1960s the parties with the largest memberships were on the political left, which was of concern to the king and the political and economic elite. The right wing Islamist parties were weak until they began to receive massive economic and other support from the U.S. government.

Today there are over 80 registered political parties, and there are around 50 broad based democratic parties committed to running on issues, rising above religion, ethnic ties, and regional loyalties. But they have received virtually no support from the countries allied to the U.S. government or the aid agencies. President Karzai recently decreed that political parties will again be barred from the August 2007 Presidential election.

What the Afghan people want and need is the democratic right to self determination: the right to choose their own government, their own institutions, and their own economic development strategy. The fact that the people of Afghanistan have been denied these fundamental democratic rights is the main reason for the unpopularity of the government and the strength of the insurgency.

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