

U.S. Solution to a U.S. Problem

By Jim Ingalls and Sonali Kolhatkar | October 2004

Afghanistan will undergo the first presidential elections in the country's history on October 9, 2004. As if surprised by the fact that Afghans could want a voice in their country's future, President George W. Bush touted the over 10 million Afghans registered to vote as "a resounding endorsement for democracy." The real surprise is that, despite rampant anti-election violence and threats of violence, so many people were brave enough to register. This certainly indicates that Afghans are desperate for a chance to control their own lives. But, even though many will risk their lives to vote, the majority of Afghans played no part in decisionmaking regarding the schedule and structure of the elections, and will not benefit from the results. This election process was imposed by the United States to solve "Afghan problems" as defined by the United States. In reality, the problems facing Afghans are the results of decisions made in Washington in the 1980s and 1990s.¹

Test for U.S., Not for Afghans

To the Bush administration and media pundits, presidential elections in Afghanistan will bring the country closer to being a "democracy," where people decide their own fate. *Business Week* describes the elections as a "first test" of President Bush's claim that Afghanistan and Iraq "are on the path to democracy." In a *Washington Post* opinion piece, Andrew Reynolds of the University of North Carolina similarly described the elections as a "Test for Afghan Democracy." In this view, any failure of the process will be caused by a lack of readiness of Afghanistan and its people for "democracy," not a failure of external players to fulfill their responsibilities to the country. What is being tested is solely the capacity of Afghans to embrace democracy. Indeed, *Business Week* describes only indigenous threats to the elections exercise: "Power brokers are trying to cut deals to eliminate competitive elections. Violence against election workers and politicians is on the rise... Hardly anyone expects the voting to meet international standards." A commonly cited statistic indicating voter fraud is the estimated 10% over-registration country-wide. According to *Business Week*, "some areas have registration rates as high as 140% of projected eligi-

ble voters." This is definitely disturbing, and is a blow to President Bush's own election propaganda, since he uses the "over 10 million registered" figure in campaign speeches as an example of the success of his foreign policy. The focus on voter fraud, however, keeps the emphasis on the Afghan failure to measure up to international standards. Few media outlets have dared to blame the United States for the more egregious fraud of imposing early elections on a still war-ravaged country where Northern Alliance warlords legitimized by Washington will continue to hold real power, regardless of who wins the vote. If the Afghan elections fail, Afghans will be blamed and Afghans will continue to suffer, seemingly as a result of their own actions.²

Another point rarely mentioned is that elections do not equal democracy. J. Alexander Thier, a former legal adviser to Afghanistan's Constitutional and Judicial Reform Commissions, is one of the few commentators who dares to utter the simple fact: "Elections themselves are only a small part of democracy." In Thier's opinion, "Effective government service, protection of individual rights, accountability—these are the true fruits of democracy. Holding elections without the rule of law can undermine democracy by sparking violence, sowing cynicism, and



allowing undemocratic forces to become entrenched.” Elections are merely “the end product of a successful democracy.” Regardless of who wins the elections and by what means, civil society in Afghanistan is at the moment anything but democratic. Foreign influence, particularly U.S. influence, has ensured that insecurity, warlordism, and a severely curtailed media are entrenched features of the political landscape.³

In reality the Afghan presidential elections will be a test not of “Afghan democracy,” but of the Bush administration’s ability to impose its political order on a country. An editorial in *Newsday* holds that, “Historic elections in Afghanistan and Iraq are key goals of U.S. foreign policy, especially for President George W. Bush, who is campaigning on his determination that they be held on schedule.” Reynolds says the elections will be “a watershed moment, equal in importance to the post-Sept. 11 ousting of the Taliban.” Since the warlords that now run most of the country are as bad as or worse than the Taliban, the ousting of the Taliban was more a watershed for Washington than for the Afghan people. Similarly, the Afghan elections are really a benchmark for the Bush administration’s foreign policy.

Reynolds argues that “A legitimately elected administration in Kabul would not just be good for the Afghans; it would be much more likely to carry out the reforms the United States so keenly wants.” It is clear that the only outcome that would be considered “legitimate” by the U.S. is a win by the incumbent, transitional President Hamid Karzai. While there are 18 candidates running, the U.S. media have focused almost exclusively on Karzai, frequently dubbed “the favorite” in news reports. For the Bush administration it is imperative that their hand-picked and well-trained candidate wins. Not only will the anticipated victory of Karzai cement the current order of U.S. influence, it will signal a victory for the “war on terror” as President Bush defines it. As Reynolds notes, “Karzai’s victory ... would shine a ray of hope on an otherwise gloomy series of U.S. foreign policy misadventures.”⁴

Women are Pawns in Election

The Bush administration constantly calls attention to the fact that 4 million of those who registered to vote in Afghanistan were women. Just as the “liberation” of Afghan women was used to justify the bombing of Afghanistan three years ago, women’s participation in U.S.-imposed election is again used to justify the U.S. approach. While the administration deals in broad statistics to paint a rosy picture, a closer look reveals that the Afghan political environment, controlled by U.S.-backed warlords and a U.S.-backed president, remains extremely hostile to women. Women comprise 60% of the population but only 43% of registered voters. Additionally, sharp differences in literacy between men and women put women at a huge disadvantage. Only 10% of Afghan women can read and write. While school attendance for girls has increased to about 50% nationwide, it is too early to affect women voters. Furthermore, under Karzai’s presidency, married women were banned from attending schools in late 2003.

While much mileage has been squeezed out of the notion that the U.S. “liberated” Afghan women, only one dollar out of every \$5,000 (\$112,500 out of \$650 million) of U.S. financial aid sent to Afghanistan in 2002 was actually given to women’s organizations. In 2003, according to Ritu Sharma, Executive Director of the Women’s Edge Coalition, that amount was reduced to \$90,000. At the same time, women have increasingly been the targets of violence. New studies by groups like Amnesty International reveal that sexual violence has surged since the fall of the Taliban, and there has been a sharp rise in incidents of women’s self-immolation in Western Afghanistan. Amnesty International has documented an escalation in the number of girls and young women abducted and forced into marriage, with collusion from the state (those who resist are often imprisoned).

U.S. policy has empowered extreme fundamentalists who have further extended women’s oppression in a traditionally ultra-conservative society. In a public opinion survey conducted in Afghanistan this July by the Asia Foundation, 72% of respondents said that men should advise women on their voting choices

and 87% of all Afghans interviewed said women would need their husband's permission to vote. On International Women's Day this year, Hamid Karzai only encouraged such attitudes. He implored men to allow their wives and sisters to register to vote, assuring them, "later, you can control who she votes for, but please, let her go [to register]." Most of the candidates running against Karzai have mentioned rights for women in some form or another as part of their campaign platforms. While this is obligatory in post-Taliban Afghanistan, it remains little more than lip service. Latif Pedram, a candidate who went slightly further than others by suggesting that polygamy was unfair to women, was barred from the election and investigated by the Justice Ministry for "blasphemy."

Just like the Afghan constitution signed earlier this year, which gives equal rights to women on paper, this election will probably have little bearing on the reality of Afghan women's lives. Denied an education and underrepresented in voter rolls, with little control over the patriarchal justice system and sexist family attitudes, women are once more simply pawns within the U.S.-designed Afghan political structure.

Warlords: Now a Problem for Bush

A recent countrywide survey of Afghans by the International Republican Institute found that "over 60% cited security as their primary concern, followed by reconstruction and economic development." According to 65% of respondents, "warlords and local commanders are the main sources of instability in the country." While most women may need the permission of their husbands to vote, their choices will be extremely limited, since most Afghans are being intimidated by U.S.-backed warlords into voting for them. According to Brad Adams, Asia Director at Human Rights Watch, "Many voters in rural areas say the [warlord] militias have already told them how to vote, and that they're afraid of disobeying them." The intimidation tactics of Abdul Rashid Dostum and others are no secret, having even raised

the ire of former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.⁵

The wider context of the warlords' power is rarely mentioned. As part of the Bush administration's "War on Terror," Washington made deals with Northern Alliance warlords in its crusade against the Taliban. Warlords were appointed to high-level government posts and allowed to regain regional power. As many factions fought one another for regional dominance, the U.S. actively denied the expansion of the International Security Assistance Force from Kabul to the rest of the country, thereby closing a crucial window of opportunity to undermine the warlords early on. One should hardly be surprised at the current situation, a natural outcome of U.S. policy over the past three years.

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When their actions only affected the lives of ordinary Afghans, warlords were not a problem for the Bush administration. Only now is Washington beginning to hold some of the warlords at arm's length, as their presence reflects badly on the carefully staged demonstration of "democracy" via elections. Even worse, a warlord may become president, thwarting the carefully planned outcome. Yunus Qanooni of the Northern Alliance is seen as a major challenger to Karzai. If Karzai doesn't win, Afghanistan could spiral out of U.S. control. To preserve control, or at least validate the propaganda that Afghanistan is a victory for the U.S. "war on terror," the Bush administration is actively lobbying Karzai's opponents to not run. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, thirteen of the 18 candidates, including Qanooni, have complained about interference from Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. Ambassador. Khalilzad has reportedly "requested" candidates to withdraw from the race, attempting to bribe them with a position in the cabinet. Senior staff members of several candidates were described as "angry over what many Afghans see as foreign interference that could undermine the shaky foundations of a democracy the U.S. promised to build."⁶

United States, Soviet Union
Responsible for Current Predicament

Andrew Reynolds claims that the Afghan presidential election “will present a choice between the old and the new, between a state corrupted by private militias and self-enriching warlords; and a new type of government that bases its legitimacy on national rather than ethnic identity.” Unfortunately there is little in the Karzai government that is new, unless your view of history reaches back only a decade.

Reynolds’s “new type of government” is simply a reworking of what operated in Afghanistan prior to 1919 under the British, and from 1979 to 1989 under the Soviet occupation: a client regime whose major decisions were to a greater or lesser extent controlled by a foreign power. In the Karzai government, it is obvious that Washington runs the show. According to the *New York Times*, U.S. ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad has “possibly as much influence” in Afghanistan as L. Paul Bremer has in Iraq. Khalilzad is known as “the Viceroy” because the influence he wields over the Afghan government reminds some Afghans of the excesses of British colonialism.” *Times* reporter Amy Waldman commented Khalilzad “often seems more like [the] chief executive” of Afghanistan than Karzai. As Khalilzad “shuttles between the American Embassy and the presidential palace, where Americans guard Mr. Karzai, one place seems an extension of the other.”⁷

It is the warlord-dominated situation in Afghanistan that is the relatively new dynamic. Reynolds’s assertion that a client regime under Karzai would be “new” is particularly chilling coming from an American, since the warlords were first helped to power by the United States as a “solution” in the 1980s to the Soviet-run client state. The CIA and its counterpart in Pakistan, the ISI, pinned most of their hopes on the ruthless Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, now working with the Taliban against Washington. Other warlords being supported with U.S. cash, weapons,

and logistical support included the fundamentalists Abdul Rasul Sayyaf and Burhannudin Rabbani, both big players in today’s Afghanistan. Current Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad was then, as he is now, “a participant in U.S. government deliberation” on support for these factions.⁸

Current U.S. ally and presidential candidate warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum was once a Soviet ally. If the Afghan warlords are to be blamed for hindering democracy in Afghanistan, ultimate responsibility lies with the U.S. and the Soviet Union for empowering them in the first place.

In reality the Afghan presidential elections will be a test not of “Afghan democracy,” but of the Bush administration’s ability to impose its political order on a country.

When the Soviet-backed Najibullah regime fell in 1992, the U.S.-sponsored factions turned their weapons on each other in an attempt to gain control of the capital. Most Afghans remember the period from 1992-1996, the time between the fall of Najibullah and the coming to power of the Taliban, as the most terrible in lived history. Significantly, it was during the period that U.S.-backed protégés were reducing Kabul to rubble that Washington lost interest. By the time the Taliban arrived, there was little left of Kabul to govern.⁹

The foreign-backed Taliban (supported chiefly by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia) were initially seen as an antidote to the anarchy caused by the foreign-backed warlords, saving Washington the trouble of cleaning up its own mess. According to the *Washington Post*, the Clinton administration believed that “a Taliban-dominated government represents a preferable alternative in some ways to the [current] faction-ridden coalition.” The *Los Angeles Times* opined that, “The American aim [in Afghanistan] was ultimately met by the Taliban.” As today, solutions were seen in the light of how they solved American, not Afghan, problems.¹⁰

The Clinton administration eventually distanced itself publicly from the Taliban, while behind the scenes cutting a deal with them on behalf of U.S. company UNOCAL to build a natural gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan. With

his finger ever in the Afghan pie, Zalmay Khalilzad was hired as an adviser to UNOCAL.

It was not until the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania were traced to bin Laden that Washington's relationship with the Taliban really soured. The U.S. then reinstated covert support to some of its former warlord allies. The 9/11 attacks in 2001 allowed the U.S. to bring old friends, now known as the Northern Alliance, back to power, giving them a new lease on political life. The warlords who are today considered a problem were legitimized and entrenched in the government three times in the past three years under orders from Washington (at the 2001 Bonn meetings, at the 2002 Emergency Loya Jirga, and the 2003 Constitutional Loya Jirga).¹¹

Prospects for the Future

Likely Scenarios

Post-election Afghanistan will look very much as it does today, if not worse. If Karzai wins with the backing of some or all Northern Alliance factions, their leaders will be awarded high-level positions, further entrenching and legitimizing them. If Karzai wins without enough support from his opponent warlords, the losing parties may attack the central government, returning the country to civil war. If Karzai loses, the warlords might form an alliance government, a horrible thought to contemplate considering the 1992-1996 "coalition government" of many of the same factions. In the latter two scenarios, it is not clear whether the U.S. would intervene and re-install Karzai as president (as it has done in Iraq with Prime Minister Iyad Allawi), or allow Afghanistan to fester and implode (as it did in the early 1990s). What is certain is that none of these scenarios will lead to peace or real democracy.

Imaginary Scenario

If the United States wanted to be truly bold, it would create the conditions for peace, justice, and democracy in Afghanistan. The first step would be to completely end all support for the Northern Alliance warlords and anyone else with a poor record on human rights. The U.S. would then assist the United Nations in disarming warlords and their private

armies, and work toward reducing the number of available weapons. Coupled with disarmament would be a "justice and reconciliation process" defined by the Afghans, by which those responsible for human rights violations would be held accountable. Ideally, U.S. and Soviet officials would be reprimanded, if not criminally prosecuted.

Instead of focusing on the failed "hunt" for Al-Qaida and Taliban members, the U.S. could save lives by ending its own military campaign.

Instead of restricting the international peacekeepers to Kabul, the U.S. should fund the expansion of their mandate to the entire country, sending a clear signal to warlords and the former Taliban that the war is over. This would provide a sense of security for Afghans interested in participating in democratic exercises like elections. International peacekeepers that truly keep the peace, instead of fighting "wars on terrorism" or buying "hearts and minds" would enhance the trust in aid agencies and allow them to remain impartial while they handle the needs of ordinary Afghans.

Instead of holding aid to rural Afghans hostage to information on "terrorists," or conducting expensive, wasteful, token reconstruction projects, the U.S. should shut down its "Provincial Reconstruction Teams." These PRTs have militarized the distribution of aid, jeopardizing the safety of real aid workers who are for the first time associated with U.S. military goals (Colin Powell calls them "force multipliers"). This in turn jeopardizes Afghans' access to aid.

Instead of pouring money into keeping only Kabul safe for Karzai, the U.S. could fully fund reconstruction and the basic human needs (food, shelter, health care, education) of Afghan people, especially women. The healthier and safer the people of Afghanistan, the better able they would be to exercise democratic rights and organize against religious fundamentalist forces and women's oppression. This aid should be unconditional, given as reparation for the damage caused by U.S.-backed factions over the past two decades.

Sadly, it is highly unlikely that the United States, with either Bush or Kerry at the helm, would embark on such a constructive series of projects. For that to

happen, the U.S. would have to, for the first time, put the human needs of the Afghan people over the military needs of its empire.

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ENDNOTES

¹ For excellent reviews of the circumstances of the Afghan elections, the problems, and the human rights and moral issues, that go beyond mainstream headlines, see A. E. Brodsky, "America is Playing a Dangerous Game with Afghanistan," *The Gadflyer*, September 14, 2004; M. Sedra, "Afghanistan: Democracy Before Peace?," (Silver City, NM & Washington DC: Foreign Policy in Focus, September 2004); Human Rights Watch, "The Rule of the Gun: Human Rights Abuses and Political Repression in the Run-up to Afghanistan's Presidential Election," September 2004.

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