

Afghan crisis enters a crucial phase

by Ramtanu Maitra

After 14 years of ceaseless wars, the last few weeks' political developments within Afghanistan indicate that the Afghan leaders are finally in the process of working out a consensus which may prevent further bloodshed and lay the foundation for an effective democratic process. The newly named prime minister, Ustad Fareed, has sent a warning to the foreign powers meddling in Afghan affairs asking them to allow the Afghans to resolve their differences.

On June 28, the 10-member Supreme Council handed over power officially to Jamaat-i-Islami leader Burhanuddin Rabbani. The council was acting according to the agreement among the major Afghan Mujahideen leaders who since 1980 had joined hands in defying the Soviet aggressors, but who then became involved in internecine warfare following the Soviet withdrawal in 1988. The agreement is supposed to turn Afghanistan into an Islamic state. The transfer of power from acting President Sibghatullah Mujaddidi to Rabbani has brought along a series of new and crucial political alliances. It is a unique event, in the sense that it is the first such peaceful transfer to take place in this century in this war-torn country.

The most important power shift is the appointment of Ustad Fareed as the prime minister. Fareed is the deputy of the controversial Hezb-e-Islami leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who has been identified in the West as the torch-bearer of Islamic fundamentalism and a major controller of Afghan heroin.

Hekmatyar's participation in the new government indicates that the two Afghan strongmen, Hekmatyar and Rabbani's deputy, Ahmed Shah Massoud—a hero of the war against the Soviet aggressors—have worked out a viable arrangement, after fighting each other for the better part of the last four years over the control of the capital city of Kabul.

Civil war averted

The peaceful transfer of power, however, did not come about smoothly. The acting President, Mujaddidi, as late as June 21 had told newsmen that he would not step down from his post. In his effort to stay in power, President Mujaddidi had courted the Uzbek militia leader, Rasheed Dostum, who was subsequently given military control of Kabul and northern Afghanistan.

Dostum, a renegade general who had fought the Afghan Mujahideen on behalf of Moscow and the Soviet-backed governments in Kabul, had earlier forged an alliance with Massoud in order to keep Hekmatyar out of Kabul. During the period of Soviet occupation, Dostum had trained his guns against Hekmatyar and his men, and it is widely acknowledged that the bad blood between Dostum and Hekmatyar runs deep.

There were genuine fears that if the transfer of power had not taken peacefully, a new bloodbath would occur in Afghanistan and would engulf the country in a dangerous civil war.

The Massoud-Dostum alliance was apparently forged with the help of the governments of Teheran and Washington, among others, and to the dismay of the Pakistani government, which would still like to see Hekmatyar as part of the overall solution. The alliance had threatened to sabotage the May 26 agreement, signed by both Hekmatyar and Massoud, which called for an election process after a six-month cooling-off period, and a consensus that the two parties would work together to establish an Islamic state. The agreement had also entrusted the security of Kabul to the hands of Massoud, while the Hezb-e-Islami would withdraw its forces to Lughar, a town approximately 65 kilometers southeast of Kabul.

Mujaddidi's maneuvers fail

Meanwhile, acting President Mujaddidi had set up a 64-person governmental authority and loaded it up with anti-Hekmatyar figures, including eight members from the small Hezb-i-Wahdat, a Shiite party backed by Iran. Earlier, Mujaddidi had accused the Hezb-e-Islami of plotting to assassinate him. On another occasion, President Mujaddidi had charged the Hezb-e-Islami with plotting against him in collusion with the Khalq faction of the Afghan Communist Party. Hekmatyar has denied both the charges.

However, the acting President's move to break the Massoud-Dostum alliance and form his own alliance with Dostum did finally lead to his own downfall. The new situation allowed Massoud and Hekmatyar to form a viable working arrangement, with President Rabbani as the head of state.

The new arrangement, no doubt, is a major setback for the Iranian government, which had been meddling in Kabul's affairs and was instrumental in pushing Dostum as a major powerbroker during the last two months.

Pakistan's former military intelligence chief and a personal friend of Hekmatyar, Gen. Hamid Gul, addressing the current development, told newsmen that there are reasons to believe that Iran has lost out in Afghanistan and in the rest of Muslim Central Asia.

It is also noted by regional observers that President Rabbani, prior to his taking over the reins of power, had visited Saudi Arabia, although it is not clear that the visit was for either religious or political reasons.