

Afghan Warlordism Revived by Washington

by Ramtanu Maitra

Washington's anti-terrorist war in Afghanistan is over. What that war turned out to be, in a nutshell, is removal of the Taliban from power and scattering of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda. There exists now a looming danger that Afghanistan will slip back to the anarchic state which typified the 1980s and gave rise to the Taliban orthodox Islamic movement as a reaction against it.

Where the war went wrong, will soon be the question of the day. The United States had no real interest in doing things right in Afghanistan. But, let us assume for a moment, that Washington indeed wanted to do things right. Then one would find that nothing happened in Afghanistan which should surprise any keen observer. Wrong from the outset were the concept, the operational management and then, of course, the hands-on attempt to micro-manage a complex social order. The arrogance to disregard these key factors stems from Washington's assumption that "daddy knows best." What should the camel-riding Afghans know about running their own country?

Washington's Signature Tune

This arrogant and infinite ignorance of the Bush Administration, particularly of the Pentagon, was best exhibited by two recent incidents which led the London *Guardian*, in its editorial on July 15, to ask the United States troops "to pack up and leave." Closer to the ground, one Afghan general told *Washington Post* correspondent Pamela Constable that "the warlords were finished, but now they are being revived with American help."

The more important of the two incidents was the blatant micro-management of the emergency Loya Jirga (Grand Council) in June, by Washington's private Afghan, Zalmay Khalilzad, the American plenipotentiary representative. This assisted the revival of the warlordism in Afghanistan.

The second incident is the weaving of a web of misstatements and callous pronouncements that followed, when 48 Afghans were killed and 117 injured, by a misdirected high-tech U.S. bomb, which struck a wedding party in the middle of night, in Uruzgan province. U.S. officials, notably Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz on July 16, found it more apt to wriggle out of any responsibility than to say a few kind words to the bereaved families.

The fall-out of these two incidents has begun to affect the situation on the ground, and lead to a point at which the Afghans may soon identify the United States as an enemy as great as the Soviet Communists they had fought and driven out in the 1980s.

Things do not have to go to that extreme, but they might. The vulgar manipulation by Khalilzad, who arm-twisted the ex-King Zahir Shah to hand over the Presidency of the transitional Afghan government to Hamid Karzai, was quickly noticed by the ethnic Pashtun community, to which both Karzai and Zahir Shah belong. Pashtuns identified this as an interference in Afghan affairs by a foreign nation with the assistance of a token Afghan. The perception led to suspicions that Karzai, the handmaiden of Washington and otherwise a virtual non-entity in the community, would deliver Afghanistan on a platter to the United States. There are reasons for having such suspicions.

One of the reasons is that the Pashtuns were convinced by the United States, prior to the October 2001 invasion, that ex-King Zahir Shah would be supported by Washington to usher in a state of relative social harmony for rebuilding Afghanistan's basic infrastructure. In order to achieve this end, the United States said it would bring in the octogenarian Zahir Shah from his 29 years of self-imposed exile in Rome and back him to the hilt. Two Pashtun collaborators—Abdul Haq and Hamid Karzai—were activated by the United States to send the "good word" to the Pashtuns, who had been the basis for the Taliban movement. It should be noted that socially, financially, and as a mujahideen fighter, Haq was much ahead of Karzai.

Both these Pashtun "friends" of Washington entered Pashtun territory in early October, with bags full of money to incite the Pashtuns against the Taliban. Haq was seized by the Taliban, and the Americans, for reasons not quite clear, did not respond in time. He was killed.

Karzai, who went to his native province of Uruzgan, fled to the hills and was rescued in time by the Americans. So, it seems that Washington preferred one Pashtun friend over the other, although both had had direct links to U.S. intelligence for years. The one who survived, ousted the ex-King with the help of Khalilzad, who had worked with the most powerful people in Washington for decades. To the chagrin of Washington, Pashtuns have seen through this game.

The Opium Factor

The Pashtuns, however, were given yet another clue earlier this month. On July 6, Abdul Haq's elder brother, the all-powerful Governor of Nangarhar province in the early 1990s, Haji Abdul Qadir, was gunned down in front of his office on his first day at work as one of Karzai's three vice-presidents. Qadir's brother, Haji Mohammad Din, who rejected Karzai's offer to assume his dead brother's job, made it clear at Jalalabad, the capital of Nangarhar province,

that it was not Allah's hand that took Qadir away from his people, but lack of security. He asked Karzai rhetorically why Qadir was not given the security he required.

Indeed, Haji Din has a good reason to ask that question. Haji Abdul Qadir was not just another Pashtun leader, but a powerful mujahideen leader as well. He had welcomed Osama bin Laden in Jalalabad, after the Yemeni renegade relocated from Sudan to Afghanistan. Haji Qadir also ran a massive drug empire, along with the convicted Pakistani drug baron Ayub Afridi, and two native Pashtun warlords, Hazrat Ali and Haji Zamman Khan. Hazrat Ali and Haji Zamman Khan had lately become unfriendly to Haji Qadir, following the latter's emergence as a crusader against opium at the behest of Karzai and the United States. But that happened only recently.

In the early and mid-1990s, Haji Qadir ran a private airline between Jalalabad and Dubai. In Dubai, his brother Abdul Haq, a close friend of former U.S. National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane, ran a string of electronic goods shops. The planes would carry heroin from Afghanistan and bring back electronic gizmos for sale to the *nouveaux riches* Pakistanis who benefitted from the exploding drug and gun market in the area. Ayub Afridi did the selling for Haji Qadir.

It was a neat little business. Those involved became millionaires. Washington, disturbed by the heroin flowing into the United States, wanted to convict Afridi, but not Qadir. Before Pakistan could get its hands on Afridi, the drug baron took Haji Qadir's plane to Dubai and surrendered to the U.S. Embassy there. Subsequently, Afridi was brought to America, convicted, spent about 42 months in prison, and then went back to Pakistan. In Pakistan, he was arrested again and was convicted for drug-trafficking in August 2001. For reasons one could only guess, Afridi was released from jail at the behest of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and was sent to the Afghan-Pakistan border.

In 1996, the Taliban took over Nangarhar province and kicked Haji Qadir out, taking control of his drug empire. Haji Qadir came to Pakistan, but Islamabad did not want an anti-Taliban Pashtun with links to U.S. intelligence, so he went to Germany. Following Abdul Haq's death in late 2001, Haji Qadir tried to position himself as his brother's successor. At the Bonn Conference on Afghanistan in January 2002, Haji Qadir tried to get the job of chairman of the Afghan interim government. It fell instead to Hamid Karzai. Haji Qadir, however, joined the Karzai Cabinet as Minister for Urban Reconstruction. At the Loya Jirga in June, he actively backed Karzai and told the ex-monarch to give his blessing to Karzai. Despite all his cooperation on behalf of the Americans and Karzai, Haji Qadir was dead on July 6.

Who killed Qadir? It could be any of the following: the Taliban renegades; or the Pakistani ISI; or the insiders within Karzai's Pashtun network; or the drug network led by Hazrat Ali and Haji Zamman Khan; or the drug warlords of Afghani-

stan; or the angry followers of ex-King Zahir Shah; or the Panjshiri-Tajiks, who dominate the Karzai Cabinet and consider Haji Qadir a threat; or the anti-American Pashtun warlord network now represented by the 1980s CIA asset Gulbuddin Hekmatyar; or the all-subsuming al-Qaeda. Washington, of course, would like all to believe that it was al-Qaeda. It beats one's imagination how al-Qaeda could pull off such an assassination in Kabul, the liberated capital of Afghanistan.

Whither Karzai?

The fashion-crazy blue-eyed Pashtun of Washington, Hamid Karzai, is in trouble. Removal of his rivals make things even worse. He is now suspect in the eyes of the Pashtuns. But, Washington is not helping him at all. For instance, the U.S. bombing of the wedding party in Uruzgan province on July 1, drew immediate angry responses from Karzai. He did that because he, like the Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar, was born in Uruzgan and he sensed the Pashtuns would take this incident seriously. They will hold him responsible for his inability to curb the American military. They could even think worse, Karzai fears.

But the United States is oblivious to this dynamic. The Pentagon first denied, then tried to fudge the numbers to say that not many were killed, and then brought in Paul Wolfowitz to declare that it was unfortunate, and yet justified, because "bad guys" were in the area. The "bad guys," in Wolfowitz's dictionary, are the Taliban who, no doubt, are in abundance in Uruzgan and in most of southern and eastern Afghanistan.

Wolfowitz's statement is bound to have a negative effect. He stayed for 24 hours and then came back to the safety of homeland security, but thousands of U.S. troops will have to carry on with the dirty work in Afghanistan. Hundreds of foreigners with the non-governmental organizations will also remain. Wolfowitz's arrogant statement has endangered the lives of all these people. Angry Pashtuns, in all likelihood, will seek revenge the same way they sought it against the Soviet Communists.

Another sign that the time is up for the United States was noticed in mid-July, when Gul Agha Shiraji, the corrupt Governor of Kandahar and a longtime U.S. asset, came out saying the United States military will have to seek permission of the local provincial authorities before carrying out any military operation. Gul Agha Shiraji may rest assured that this is not going to happen. It is inconceivable to the Pentagon that it would seek permission of such "lowly" individuals, who are propped up by the grace of Washington. The Pentagon would "justify" overruling Shiraji's demand, by saying that such policy would compromise intelligence and success.

However, if the Karzais and Shirajis are undermined further, it is almost a certainty that the rest of the Americans' stay in Afghanistan will be most unpleasant.