

Taliban victory? Kerry in Kabul

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KABUL (March 28, 2013):- Floated for three years, reconciliation with the Taliban is now official policy in Afghanistan, endorsed by US Secretary of State John Kerry in his joint press conference with President Karzai on March 26. The Taliban plan to open an office in Qatar and come out into the open. Ultimately, perhaps the Taliban will join the government and appear in Parliament like the other warlords.

Peace without justice is the only kind of peace that is on offer, and a continuation of war seems to be in no one's interest. But can negotiations lead to peace? Who is negotiating from strength, and who from weakness?

The external players have reasons to want a reduction of conflict. The US has endorsed reconciliation partly because it wants to diminish its military role here. It will still support the government and it will still continue to use special forces and drones. If it also continues to pressure Pakistan to stop its heavy military support to the Taliban, the Taliban's military capacity will continue to diminish. Pakistan's military continues to be unpopular and people there are excited about the possibility that it could become a 'normal' democracy where governments change through elections instead of periodic dictatorships: it's not a great time to be sponsoring covert operations.

Within Afghanistan, there are reasons to doubt a repeat of history. When the Taliban took Kabul in 1996, the population of the city was around 1.3 million. Today it's closer to 6 million. The other big cities in Afghanistan have also experienced massive growth, much of which came from rural-to-urban migration. Demographically, in relative terms, the Taliban's rural base has shrunk as its urban opposition has grown. Afghanistan is urbanizing, and urban insurgency is much more difficult than rural insurgency. Attacks on civilians in urban areas (terrorism) can have powerful psychological and emotional impact, but it translates into the exact opposite of popularity and is almost impossible to convert into political power.

Support for education is now close to hegemonic. As a member of the Chamber of Commerce told me, "people who burned schools 30 years ago are sending their children to school today." Eight million children are enrolled in schools, 37% of whom are girls. Tens of thousands have gone to university in the past 10 years; some 95,000 are currently enrolled, 20,000 of whom are women. In Ghazni province, villagers spontaneously revolted against the Taliban and drove them out (see Ron Moreau's story in Newsweek June 24, 2012: "How the Taliban drove Afghan villagers to rise up against them."). Today, Ghazni is loosely controlled by paramilitary forces, which may not be much improvement from a human rights perspective, but the point here is that the uprising occurred over schools. The villagers wanted them, the Taliban didn't, and the latter were driven out.

The Taliban have two main grievances to form the basis of their recruiting. On both, the government has pulled the ground out from under their feet.

First, the Taliban have tried to present themselves as the guardians of religion. But the post-2001 government deliberately called itself the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and, as one of the drafters of the constitution, Shukria Barakzai told me, "our constitution says that all of our laws are based in Islam. Will the Taliban object to that?" If Afghanistan is already an Islamic Republic, what is the

need for the Taliban?

Second, the Taliban have presented themselves as the only ones fighting the foreign occupation. After 2014, depending on how the US behaves, there may be no foreign occupation for them to fight, and the accusation that they are mere proxies of Pakistan will gain more sting. This will remain the strongest political card they have to play. From 2007-2011, UNAMA reported in its 2011 POC report, civilian casualties have increased, with 1523 deaths in 2007, 2118 deaths in 2008, 2412 deaths in 2009, 2790 in 2010, and 3021 in 2011. In 2011, 77% of civilian deaths were caused by anti-government elements, but the 23% has disproportionate political impact because it is associated with foreign occupiers. Unfortunately, with all the drones flying, withdrawal may not mean that the killing stops. But if the US stops killing civilians in 2014, the Taliban could end up with neither exploitable grievances nor external support.

At that point, the Taliban will find the wisest course to be to join the government, gaining access to all the rewards that the other armed groups have enjoyed. The people of Afghanistan would then be facing the same kinds of problems everyone faces: a corrupt and criminal political class, massive inequality, a depressed economy, a government without much capacity or will to intervene, and an international context that is unfavourable for independent development. Given what they have faced for the past 30 years, a situation like this should be easy for Afghans.

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P.S.

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