

# Villains and clowns dominate Afghan electoral theatre

Friday 23 October 2009, by [SULEHRIA Farooq](#) (Date first published: 16 October 2009).

Unlike 2004 , global media are not buzzing round forthcoming Afghan presidential election scheduled for August 20. The coy little coverage one finds in mainstream media is replete with pessimism. Hamid karzai, the front-runner among 41 candidates, has failed to generate the media sympathy he managed last time with his telegenic Chappan (green gown), Karakul (cap) and English-speaking skills.

To make matters worse, his choice of vice presidential running mate, Tajik-warlord Qasim Faheem, proved too provocative to be ignored even by United Nations mission in Afghanistan. Mission's head, kai Edie, asked Karzai to pick someone else.

Qasim Faheem, according to Brad Adams, Asia director of New York-based watchdog Human Rights Watch, is "one of the most notorious warlords in the country, with the blood of many Afghans." (Reuters, May 5)

Karim Khalili, sitting vice president and Karzai's running mate for the slot of second vice president, is an equally infamous warlord. Ethnically Hazara, Khalili was once close to Tehran but was quick to distance himself from Ayotollahs in post-Taliban period. Hence, rewarded with the slot of vice-president.

To ensure his re-election, Karzai has struck alliances with warlords from every ethnic group in Afghanistan. In the Uzbek-populated, Karzai is relying on Rashid Dostum. In Helmand, drug baron Sher Mohammad Akhundzada will ensure Karzai's victory. Pashtun warlord Gul Agha Sherzai will secure Kandahar. Rasul Sayyaf has also endorsed Karzai. One, however, should not blame Hamid Karzai. Washington has depended on the same people for bringing "stability and democracy" in the post-Taliban period.

Alas! Karzai's major rival, former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah, is hardly a choice either to flaunt as a poster boy for the democracy despite his campaign slogan ("Change"), an attempt to caricature Obama. A human face for Northern Alliance's brutalities, Abdullah Abdullah is not a warlord. He is their spokesperson. As once was Hamid Karzai. Hence, no surprise if *New York Times* seeks refuge in Ashraf Ghani, "a technocrat", who "Shakes Up the Afghan Campaign": "A former finance minister with a background in American academia and at the World Bank , Mr. Ghani, 60, says he is trying to change politics in Afghanistan. Using television and radio, Internet donations and student volunteers, as well as traditional networks like religious councils, he is seeking to reach out to young people, women and the poor, and do the unexpected: defeat President Hamid Karzai." (NYT, Aug. 13)

Unexpected will remain unexpected if one goes by opinion polls recently conducted by International Republican Institute as well as Glevum Associates. Both polls found only 3-4 percent Afghans willing to vote for World Bank employee despite the services rented from political strategist James Carville and "Change" as major slogan like Abdullah Abdullah.

According to these polls, Ghani was placed a distant fourth trailing behind Ramzan Bashardost.

Ethnically Hazara, Bashardost perhaps is the only candidate widely respected among Afghans for his integrity. A former minister, Bashardost has been critical of Karzai administrations corruption. He has always been raising his voice for voiceless. However, without guns and drug-money, he stands no chance. Also, strength of his character is neutralised by his intellectual weakness. His recent proclamation, during a debate on Ariana TV, that he would he would make a 5000-strong commando unit, to kill president of Pakistan if ISI ill-treats Afghan refugees became a butt of jokes. His vow to annex and assimilate Mashad (in Iran), Panjdeh in Turkmenistan and all the Durand (border areas between Afghanistan, Pakistan) back into Afghanistan has only done him disservice. (urozgan.org)

Rest of the candidates (three out of 41 have meantime relinquished their bids in Karzai's favour while one for Abdullah's sake) include include all sorts of surrealist villains and un-entertaining clowns. There is Shahnawaz Tanai who precipitated Dr Naguib's ouster from power back in 1992, when he betrayed Kabul and joined hands with Mujahideen. Once as Minister of Defence under Dr Naguib, he was a strong supporter of Soviet-intervention. Now he declares there is no difference between Nato and Red Army (BBC Persian Aug 9).

Once member of Parcham faction and ambassador to Soviet-era Moscow, Habib Mangal is also running. Former Taliban commander, Mullah Rocketi (an MP), a nickname he earned during "Jihad" against Soviets for his love of Rockets, no longer finds democracy incompatible with Islam. Hence, he also has his eyes set on the palatial presidency jealously guarded by U.S. troops.

The journalists seeking juicy stories need not worry. To their relief, there are also two women candidates: Frozan Fana and Shehla Ata.

Shehla Ata, also member of Afghan parliament, says : "Taliban are my sons." (BBC Persian Aug. 8)

Not to be outdone, Frozan Fana declares: "Taliban are my brothers". (BBC Persian Aug 13)

Though rest of the candidates have not announced their kinship with Taliban----even if many have been their Jihadi cousins----yet every other candidate, has been sincerely promising dialogue with Taliban.

Even Hamid Karzai now wants to have a Loya Jirga (Grand Assembly of the Tribal Chiefs) to invite Taliban to talks. (BBC Pashto, Aug 13)

Abdullah Abdullah, on winning elections would "like to work towards reconciliation with Taliban". (New York Times, July 23)

One candidate, Sarwar Ahmadzai, during a TV debate (Aug 8) went a step further in his bid to entice voters and declared that not merely Mullah Omar even Gulbadin Hekmatyar as well as Jalal ud Din Haqqani were brothers of all Afghans. An angry Bashardost responded that he would never allow alleged criminals like these to be part of his government. Ahmadzai "angrily jumped from his chair, shook his fist, and threw his fountain pen at Dr. Bashardost while shouting that he was one family with Mullah Omar, Hekmatyar, and Haqqani... and Dr. Bashardost must show his respect to these great men". (Kabulpress.org)

Paradoxically, all those promising to woo Taliban keep quiet on US occupation. Though Latif Pedram, Ramzan Bashardost, Shanawaz Tanai even Ashraf Ghani have vowed to close down Bagram, Afghan version of Abu Gharib, yet US occupation is not an issue in the electoral debate. The key issues have been corruption and security (or lack of it). The lack of security does not merely owe to an growing Taliban militancy. Defenceless Afghans fear the ruling (Northern Alliance) warlords more than Taliban. The Taliban insurgency is, no doubt, a security nightmare but excesses (murders, rapes, kidnappings) committed by Nato-backed warlords have equally contributed to a deterioration

in the law and order situation. Besides an abuse of human rights, these warlords have been economically plundering, in tandem with Family Karzai, Afghanistan.

From Gen. Stanley McChrystal , top US military chief in Afghanistan, to war mongers like columnist Thomas Friedman, of late have been blaming "corruption in Karzai administration" for Taliban insurgency.

The aid money reaching Kabul is conveniently pocketed by ministers. Drug trafficking offers another opportunity to make some quick bucks in case business favours, kickbacks and bribes prove insufficient to satiate ruling cliques' lust for money.

Five years ago, Afghan queued outside the polling stations in the hope of security. Their hopes have been lavishly betrayed. Tribal or ethnic affinities (or rivalries), money and guns may provide the political paparazzis with photo-ops on August 20: voters holding out purple thumbs. The turn out will remain low and if one goes by opinion polls mentioned above, Karzai (likely to get only 36% votes according to Glevum poll) is bound to face a run-off. It remains to be seen whether karzai emulates the example of his Iranian counterpart or not, opponents like Ashraf Ghani, however, have adopted the colour green for their campaign. Just in case!

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**P.S.**

\* Farooq Sulehria's ZSpace Page.