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DEMOCRATIZATION OF AFGHANISTAN

by

Carolyn C. Coleman, Major, United States Air Force

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Advisor: Dr. Jonathan Zartman, PhD

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Abstract

Almost nine years since the start of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, democracy in Afghanistan seems on the verge of failure and the country remains divided. Despite international efforts, the original vision of widespread democracy in Afghanistan has yet to be fulfilled. As the continuing violence inhibits efforts to reconstruct key infrastructure such as roads, water and power, the Afghan people are losing faith in democracy and seeking security and stability wherever it can be found. Therefore, the premature push for democratization prior to ensuring stability has impeded the establishment of an effective and viable democratic framework in Afghanistan. The international community has created a centralized Afghan government structure that fails to empower existing leaders at the provincial level and below, lacks legitimacy due to its inability to ensure security for its people, and tolerates widespread corruption, which fuels mistrust among the Afghan population. If democracy is going to succeed, the Afghan government must make visible improvements in these areas. This will take time and resources. The Afghan people must also realize that democracy does not happen overnight and will not be perfect. The international community must be cognizant of the fact that democracy in Afghanistan must be shaped by the Afghan people not outside entities. Any other way will result in failure.

Almost nine years since the start of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, democracy in Afghanistan seems on the verge of failure and the country remains divided. Despite international efforts, the original vision of widespread democracy in Afghanistan has yet to be fulfilled. As insurgents continue to launch attacks against the people, the offices and leaders of Afghanistan and the International Coalition, many question if democracy is even possible in an Islamic society torn apart by years of war. With so much foreign involvement in shaping Afghanistan's democratic government, one begins to wonder, are the Afghan people involved in the process or are they just recipients of outside intervention?¹

As the continuing violence inhibits efforts to reconstruct key infrastructure such as roads, water and power, the Afghan people are losing faith in democracy and seeking security and stability wherever it can be found. Therefore, the premature push for democratization prior to ensuring stability has impeded the establishment of an effective and viable democratic framework in Afghanistan. The international community has created a centralized Afghan government structure that fails to empower existing leaders at the provincial level and below, lacks legitimacy due to its inability to ensure security for its people, and tolerates widespread corruption, which fuels mistrust among the Afghan population.

Astri Suhrke notes that Afghanistan is a country "divided by ethnicity, tribes, clans and sub-clans, and by urban versus rural lifestyles."² Major ethnic groups, such as the Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek, remain deeply divided due to many years of conflict.³ Provincial, regional, and local councils wield power through their competing spheres of influence. This diverse and fragmented environment does not easily lend itself to co-existing within a centralized democratic government framework. Previous attempts at democracy proved weak and

ineffective, as competing loyalties based on tribal, ethnic or economic interests drove efforts to dominate the parliament.⁴

Members were consumed with advancing their own parochial interests and tribal agendas, thereby inhibiting national level policy making and legislation.⁵ With these cultural and societal factors in mind it is easy to see why the Afghan population is skeptical and wary of the current centralized government. All control rests with the President, leaving lower levels of governance with little authority and influence to advocate for services to support their people. The parliament lacks power and budgetary control, making it weak and subordinate to the President. Provincial councils also lack budgetary autonomy since all money is funneled to and controlled by the central government.⁶ Regional governments function more as intermediary offices responsible only for moving money from the national to local level.⁷ As a result of such a centralized government, as well as high levels of corruption and the lack of transparency in public affairs, people see that provincial, regional, and local interests remain neglected despite significant monetary aid and resources. This lack of local autonomy fuels more distrust in the centralized democratic government because Afghans feel their needs and concerns are not being met by the individuals they voted into office to represent them.

In addition to its inability to involve local governance in the democratic national government, the current Afghan government has been unable to ensure security. The insecurity throughout Afghanistan threatens all aspects of the democratic process. If people feel threatened they are not going to leave the safety of their home or village to go vote, especially since there is no recourse via the justice system against the violence from insurgent groups.⁸ These violent groups in effect drive the outcome of the votes and challenge the legitimacy of the democratic process. Violence leads to greater tribal or group solidarity and fuels mistrust in governmental

institutions and officials, further reducing their legitimacy.⁹ The civilian collateral damage produced by the coalition forces also degrades the Afghan government's legitimacy and provides ammunition for the insurgents to use against the government, showing the people that the centralized government is not protecting them. The inability of the local police and military to ensure security for the people, despite significant international support and resources, fuels the already high level of mistrust in the national government. Additionally, coalition forces operating freely within Afghanistan with little input from the Afghan government further contributes to the lack of faith in the national government.¹⁰

Finally, the current government's tolerance of widespread corruption further incites mistrust among the Afghan population and contributes to its lack of legitimacy. Key officials in Karzi's government have been connected to drug trafficking and corruption, including his brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai.¹¹ The Karzi government, in an effort to maintain control and minimize confrontation, allowed warlords and former Taliban leaders to participate in parliamentary elections facilitating their political and economic influence in the national government.¹² By incorporating these individuals associated with corruption and drug trafficking into the Afghan government, the Karzi administration has lost public trust and support: the Afghan population associate democracy with holding human rights violators accountable for their crimes.¹³ Their inclusion in the newly formed government showed that the Afghan central government was less concerned about the peoples' needs and interests and more concerned with maintaining its centralized power base. Instead of punishing those involved in corruption, the Afghan government chooses to move individuals to other jobs.¹⁴ Corruption is also found in the judicial system and police force. According to opinion polls, many Afghans would prefer justice enforced by the Taliban rather the justice administered by the corrupt court

system.¹⁵ Inadequate pay for governmental officials adds to the atmosphere of corruption seen at all levels of governance. To supplement their meager salaries governmental officials often accept bribes and payments in exchange for their influence in the national government.

For democracy to succeed in Afghanistan significant and noticeable progress is needed in these three areas. Local governance must be included in the democratic national government. Provincial councils and regional governments must be provided with their own budgets to allow for focused efforts on projects deemed essential by the local populace. Afghan history has shown that, over the long term, local and tribal governing bodies prevail over efforts to institute centralized government. Afghanistan needs greater decentralization to bolster the legitimacy of the national government, restore trust in the new government, and empower local tribes and villages.¹⁶ Additionally, efforts must be made to educate the Afghan people on the limits of democracy and new institutions. Surveys have shown that Afghans have unrealistically high expectations in their new government.¹⁷ Educating the Afghan people about the democratic process and their role in it will help to temper discontent with the slow progress of improvements, and to foster a better understanding and more realistic expectations for their new government.¹⁸

The Afghan government's ability to provide sustainable security for its people must also be improved. Key to this effort is the U.S. and NATO's on-going counterinsurgency operation. U.S. and NATO forces must ensure a coordinated effort in concert with the Afghan government.¹⁹ A shared vision between coalition forces and the Afghan government will help create a unified front between the two entities and build faith in the government's ability to ensure security. Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police development must continue to focus on providing the best training possible to ensure sustained security.²⁰ Providing a

reliable and proficient security force will make great strides in improving the government's legitimacy. The Afghan government must also continue to foster military and political ties with Pakistan.²¹ A coordinated effort between both countries is needed to ensure counterinsurgency gains are not lost. Additionally, the Afghan government must put forth to its people an extensive information campaign to illustrate its efforts to improve security and stability and dispel harmful messages from insurgents.²²

In addition to ensuring local governance involvement and sustained security, the Afghan government must minimize corruption to the maximum extent possible. Corrupt officials must face criminal prosecution and be removed; rather than simply being moved to another government position.²³ Cooperation among government agencies is critical to minimizing corruption and ensuring universal enforcement of anticorruption laws. Analysis of areas most vulnerable to corruption is required to ensure the government focuses on fixing the worst areas first in order to reduce corruption and show significant progress.²⁴ The Afghan government must provide financial control mechanisms within the core budget to also help prevent corruption.²⁵ Revision of pay scales for police, judges, and other government officials to ensure adequate compensation for supporting their families is needed and will greatly help to reduce widespread corruption.²⁶

Despite close to nine years of international assistance, democracy remains elusive in Afghanistan. By hastily instituting a centralized democratic government before establishing security in Afghanistan, the international community has created a government that lacks legitimacy, fails to empower all levels of government, and ignores widespread corruption among its leaders. If democracy is going to succeed, the Afghan government must make visible improvements in these areas. This will take time and resources. On the other hand, the Afghan

people must also realize that democracy does not happen overnight and will not be perfect. It will take time for a democratic governmental structure to take hold throughout the country. Additionally, the international community must be cognizant of the fact that democracy in Afghanistan must be shaped by the Afghan people not outside entities. Any other way will result in failure.

Endnotes

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- ¹ Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh and Michael Schoiswohl, "Playing with Fire? The International Community's Democratization Experiment in Afghanistan," *International Peacekeeping* 15, no. 2 (April 2008): 253.
- ² Astri Suhrke, "Democratizing a Dependent State: The Case of Afghanistan," *Democratization* 15, no. 3 (June 2008): 634.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Ibid., 633.
- ⁶ Hamish Nixon and Richard Ponzio, "Building Democracy in Afghanistan: The Statebuilding Agenda and International Engagement," *International Peacekeeping* 14, no. 1 (January 2007): 32.
- ⁷ Charles L. Barry and Samuel R. Greene, *What Democracy for Afghanistan? An Analysis Utilizing Established Norm and Five Non-Western Case Studies*, Defense and Technology Paper (Washington DC: Center For Technology and National Security Policy, 2009), 35.
- ⁸ Ibid., 13.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Astri Suhrke, "Democratizing a Dependent State: The Case of Afghanistan," *Democratization* 15, no. 3 (June 2008): 644.
- ¹¹ Charles L. Barry and Samuel R. Greene, *What Democracy for Afghanistan? An Analysis Utilizing Established Norm and Five Non-Western Case Studies*, Defense and Technology Paper (Washington DC: Center For Technology and National Security Policy, 2009), 52.
- ¹² Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh and Michael Schoiswohl, "Playing with Fire? The International Community's Democratization Experiment in Afghanistan," *International Peacekeeping* 15, no. 2 (April 2008): 261.
- ¹³ Ibid., 260.
- ¹⁴ Charles L. Barry and Samuel R. Greene, *What Democracy for Afghanistan? An Analysis Utilizing Established Norm and Five Non-Western Case Studies*, Defense and Technology Paper (Washington DC: Center For Technology and National Security Policy, 2009), 52.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 51.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 35.
- ¹⁷ Hamish Nixon and Richard Ponzio, "Building Democracy in Afghanistan: The Statebuilding Agenda and International Engagement," *International Peacekeeping* 14, no. 1 (January 2007): 37.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Ali. A. Jalali, "Afghanistan: The Challenge of State Building," in *Afghanistan Transition Under Threat*, ed. Geoffrey Hayes and Mark Sedra (Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008), 34.
- ²⁰ Charles L. Barry and Samuel R. Greene, *What Democracy for Afghanistan? An Analysis Utilizing Established Norm and Five Non-Western Case Studies*, Defense and Technology Paper (Washington DC: Center For Technology and National Security Policy, 2009), 55.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Ibid., 49.
- ²³ Ibid., 56.
- ²⁴ William A. Byrd, "Responding to Afghanistan's Development Challenge: An Assessment of Experience and Priorities for the Future," in *Afghanistan Transition Under Threat*, ed. Geoffrey Hayes and Mark Sedra (Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008), 105.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Charles L. Barry and Samuel R. Greene, *What Democracy for Afghanistan? An Analysis Utilizing Established Norm and Five Non-Western Case Studies*, Defense and Technology Paper (Washington DC: Center For Technology and National Security Policy, 2009), 56.

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