

Creating democracy in Afghanistan was doomed from the start

by Gwynne Dyer

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Two years after American troops arrived in Kabul, how is the Bush administration's project for a democratic and prosperous Afghanistan coming along? Well, the opium crop is booming: 3,600 metric tons this year, almost back up to the peak production of 4,600 metric tons that was reached before the Taliban banned the crop in 1999. Virtually none of the revenue finds its way into the hands of Hamid Karzai's interim government in Kabul; the provincial warlords who control almost everything outside the capital keep it for themselves.

The rest of Afghanistan's cash income comes almost entirely from foreign aid, but much of it is channeled through the same local warlords, strengthening their grip on the population. Small wonder that the new Afghan national army, supposed to be 70,000 strong, only managed to train 4,000 troops last year, and that the proportion of girls at school, never more than half, is dropping again because of widespread intimidation in rural areas.

Karzai is a legitimate and respected political leader, but he is only a Pashtun-speaking figurehead in an interim government whose dominant figures are mostly drawn from the non-Pashtun minorities of the north. That was inevitable at the start, because the United States subcontracted the actual job of overthrowing Taliban rule on the ground to the Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara and Turkmen militias of the Northern Alliance, but little has been done to adjust the balance since. So the southern, Pashtun-speaking provinces that were once the Taliban's heartland are falling back into the hands of the resurgent fundamentalists.

Most of Zabul and Oruzgan provinces and half of the Kandahar region are once again Taliban-controlled by night, and U.S. troops and those of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) have come under fire more often in the past three months than in all of the previous 15. More than two dozen American and ISAF troops have been killed this year, a loss rate worse than Iraq given the far smaller number of foreign troops in Afghanistan.

U.S. officials claim to be inflicting vastly greater casualties on their opponents (more than 400 Taliban fighters killed in September alone), but the fact that most of these casualties are caused either by American airstrikes or by local militias leaves much room for doubt. The militias have a habit of furthering their private interests by labeling their opponents "Taliban," and the airstrikes are often inaccurate because the intelligence is so bad: Two U.S. attacks in southeastern Afghanistan killed 15 children in the same week in early December.

After 15 aid workers were killed in Taliban attacks in recent months, the United Nations has

pulled its foreign staff back to Kabul and forbidden them even to walk in the streets. Senior U.N. officials have publicly doubted whether the elections scheduled for next June will happen at all. "There is a palpable risk that Afghanistan will again turn into a failed state, this time in the hands of drug cartels and narco-terrorists," warns Antonio Maria Costa, director of the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime. But why has it gone so badly wrong? Simple arithmetic provides the answer.

Afghanistan's population is only slightly smaller than that of Iraq: about 20 million versus 25 million. The occupation force in Iraq numbers at least 150,000 American and allied troops, but there are only one-tenth as many in Afghanistan: 10,000 U.S. regular and special forces soldiers spread around the country plus 5,000 ISAF troops who are largely confined to the capital. Orthodox military experts reckon even the U.S.-led force in Iraq is too small for such a large and populous country. By the same token, the number of foreign troops in Afghanistan is hopelessly inadequate for the job.

Why is it so small? Because U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was determined to keep most U.S. troops free for the planned attack on Iraq. This meant that his only option for controlling rural Afghanistan was to make alliances with local warlords and try to rule through them.

Until recently, these local U.S.-warlord alliances did prevent a Taliban comeback -- but now that containment policy is failing in Pashtun areas, and of course it meant that the project for a democratic Afghanistan was doomed from the start.

It was probably never taken seriously at the Pentagon, which has always backed its warlord allies against the Karzai government's attempts to assert the authority of the center. (When Karzai tried to fire four or five "governors" who were running their provinces as personal fiefdoms last May, U.S. officials overruled him.)

Now the roof is slowly falling in, and U.S. policy is slowly starting to change. More aid money and new Provincial Reconstruction Teams are being sent to Afghanistan, and ISAF is at last being asked to deploy its troops outside of Kabul. But there is little enthusiasm among NATO countries for playing second fiddle to the U.S. special forces in provincial Afghanistan, and there is still no sign that the United States is ready to break with its warlord allies.

Three predictions. There will be no internationally recognized free elections in Afghanistan in 2004 (though some sort of charade may be arranged). U.S. forces will pull out within three years. The Taliban will be back in power within five.

Gwynne Dyer is a London-based independent journalist whose articles are published in 45 countries.

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