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The hasty exit strategy February 2011

By Aunohita Mojumdar

As the Western powers prepare to hightail it out of Afghanistan, there is little accountability to the Afghan people.



Photo credit: Marcin Bondarowicz

'If only you could take the Afghans out of the equation, you might be able to rebuild their country' – or at least so goes the black humour within a small section of the international community, the long-term residents who have watched with frustration as the country has moved from international-backed plan to plan, proffering new panaceas with seasonal regularity as the situation deteriorates. With each year deemed more critical than the last, the only underlying strand unifying these 'solutions' has been a singular absence of the Afghan citizen from the centrality of plans, projects and policies. Like *collateral damage*, the euphemism used to describe the death of civilians in military operations, Afghan citizens have been corollary to the rebuilding of their country. Unless their interests are allowed to take centre stage, no plan or policy is likely to make a substantive difference, even though other interest groups, including the donor countries or the powerful political elite of Afghanistan, might achieve their short-term or even long-term goals.

Although there is widespread agreement that Afghanistan is a complex country with complicated problems, solutions adopted have usually lacked the necessary sophistication, being reduced to one-dimensional aims. Despite its shortcomings, the 2001 Bonn process spelt out the components of a modern state, implementation of which could have done much to stabilise the country. However the timetable set for its completion was unrealistic, with emphasis on achieving the form rather than the substance of the agreement. While this allowed the international community to claim success in completing its blueprint by 2005, it left Afghans with a Constitution riddled with contradictions and a lack of clarity on the delegation of administrative and political authority, both of which have repeatedly come back to haunt the polity.

Since then, the situation has followed a downward spiral, with the international community adopting and discarding a succession of diagnoses and treatments, each centred on the one big idea that would provide the key. Corruption, President Hamid Karzai, Pakistan, Indo-Pakistani relations have, by turns, all figured as the bogey. Even democracy has begun to be seriously considered in this light – the ‘Afghanistan is not Switzerland’ theme. The accompanying solutions have, however, suffered from a remarkable lack of accountability to the Afghan citizen.

No accountability

The current buzzword is ‘Afghanisation’. This goal sounds both noble and progressive, constituting the handing over of control of decision-making to Afghans, thus strengthening their sovereign status. Yet, the institutions and processes put in place since 2001 have been contrary to the aims of establishing a responsive government and representative polity. Despite the obvious difficulties of creating a strong, centralised state in a country characterised by regional autonomy and the dysfunction of three decades of conflict, the most centralised form of government was chosen. Dominant interests of the Western coalition ensured that the Constitution, rather than reflecting the country’s decentralised polity and pluralistic social fabric, centralised all political and executive authority in the president. Having a one-man show made it easier for many of the donor countries to deal with Afghanistan, but it denied representative and participatory decision-making to Afghans.

While Afghanistan has been called an electoral democracy, political parties were banned from elections under an electoral law that prevents political consolidation through a complex system of multi-seat single-constituency voting (see *Himal March 2010*, [‘Tattered parachute’](#)). Afghans therefore have neither the advantages of a strong authoritarian government nor the benefits of a political democracy.

Even the limited accountability to the people that might have been possible under this system has been further diluted by denying elected bodies a clear role and authority. The Parliament, the strongest of the country’s elected bodies, uses its leverage to play the spoiler, but is prevented from playing a more positive role in shaping governance in the partyless system. Provincial representatives, meanwhile, although also elected, have almost no role or power, with the provincial governments run by governors answerable only to the president. Even the governors themselves lack power, and moves at introducing effective sub-national governance have yielded little. District-level elections, mandated by the Constitution, have not been held.

While there is a strong body of opinion that feels a Westminster-style democracy might be more suited to Afghanistan, there is scope for much greater political and administrative accountability even within existing provisions. At a time when the armed opposition is being wooed to lay down arms and join the mainstream, it is imperative that ordinary Afghans are also provided the means to participate in governance if their loyalties to the pro-government forces are to be retained. Channels also have to be created to address citizens’ grievances, if they are not to be further alienated.

A critical aspect is the conflict of interest of the Afghan leadership. A significant section of influential Afghans benefit directly from the spoils of war, as the international community pays them for providing militias, land for military bases, goods and services for those bases, all at hugely inflated prices. Whatever the reasons for this, the operational practices of the international community have created a divide between the interests of the Afghan population and a significant section of its leaders, who stand to lose personally and monetarily if peace were to arrive.

Good to go

The disjunction between the concerns of Afghans and those of the Western compact was highlighted starkly in the December 2010 review of US strategy in Afghanistan. The review drew exceedingly positive conclusions of the US security strategy, claiming ‘notable operational gains’, ‘progress across all three assessed areas of al-Qa’ida, Pakistan and Afghanistan’ and ‘significant progress in disrupting and dismantling the Pakistan-based leadership and cadre of al-Qa’ida over the past year’. It also claimed that the security forces had ‘reduced overall Taliban influence and arrested the momentum they had achieved in recent years in key parts’ of Afghanistan. The glowing report card was presented even as civilian casualties increased sharply amidst a general rise in violence, increasing restrictions on the movement of the international community within Afghanistan and an increased threat level faced by the diplomatic community, even in relatively safe Kabul.

The contradictions between the US claims and ground realities are reconcilable, however, if one looks at the divergent goals between the US and the Afghan people. Speaking of the review, President Barack Obama said, 'From the start, I've been very clear about our core goal. It's not to defeat every last threat to the security of Afghanistan, because, ultimately, it is Afghans who must secure their country. And it's not nation-building, because it is Afghans who must build their nation. Rather, we are focused on disrupting, dismantling and defeating al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and preventing its capacity to threaten America and our allies in the future.'

The Western coalition and the troop-contributing countries see themselves as answerable to their own populations – not to Afghans. As early as 2001, the US, reflecting 'a desire by the American people to not seek only revenge, but to win a war against barbaric behaviour', in the words of President George W Bush, prevented the expansion of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mandated by the UN; and co-opted key militia commanders by equipping them in the pursuit of extremists turning a blind eye to their human-rights record and their terrorisation and brutality towards the local population. ISAF itself came under NATO command, later changed to US-led NATO command, and the cooption of militia leaders was carried on by several other Western countries with donor countries providing arms and money to specific commanders in the area, both in Kabul and, more specifically, in areas where their troops are based. By engaging with these commanders, they have also provided them with a degree of political legitimacy they might otherwise lack.

Receiving their wherewithal directly from the Western coalition, these militia commanders have remained unaccountable to the local population. They have also manipulated the considerable firepower of the Western military forces to target their political enemies and settle local rivalries, consolidating control in a situation of political flux. The international community did not deploy troops for the essential task of peacekeeping, and the strengthening of the Afghan army and police was neglected. All the while, the Afghan population was asked to support the Karzai government and its allies, and left at the mercy of insurgents, criminal networks and the drug mafia.

Civilian casualties caused by international forces and the response to them provide a clear example of the divergence of interests and the lack of accountability to the Afghan population. While the Afghan government has been paying *solatia*, or compensation, to civilians killed by the international forces, it lacks the authority to pursue action, either criminal or disciplinary, against the foreign military personnel. This task has been left to the discretion of the troop-contributing country. Instances of disciplinary action are rare and the civilian casualty figures acknowledged by the international forces remain consistently lower than those compiled by the UN. Most civilian casualties take place either due to lack of information or due diligence, but the numbers have almost certainly escalated because of the lack of punitive action.

Transition to what?

In seeking to hand over the responsibility of security to the Afghan security forces, the foremost concern of the Western coalition has been a timetable for pullout of troops to present to their own domestic public, rather than an appraisal based on the security for Afghans (see *Himal December 2010*, '[Afghanistan: Too much, too little](#)'). But how convinced is the Western coalition that Afghans are actually ready to begin the transition, now mandated to begin in early 2011?

In answer, panic followed the Karzai government's decision to put a halt to the operations of private security companies in Afghanistan in October last year. The Western countries, most of whom use such companies, went into a frenzy, and private companies executing their projects said they would vote with their feet if the private security companies were shut down – a threat that most donor governments found both credible and justified. As recently as early January, US Ambassador Karl Eikenberry was asking President Karzai to increase the number of personnel in the private security companies. Yet the preparedness of the Afghan forces is nonetheless deemed sufficient to begin taking over the security of the country.

To ensure this 'preparedness' the international coalition has adopted two policies that are likely to further weaken the security apparatus of the Afghan state and endanger its citizens. The Afghan forces are now being built up at a rapid rate, with the emphasis on churning out numbers rather than ensuring quality of training and command structures. It is clear that an army and police force created in this manner will prove to be more of a threat than a panacea. In addition, since the numbers of personnel still remain below what is seen as required, the international forces are setting up community militias and arming communities. Needless, to say, these are two measures that have proven detrimental in Afghanistan, not just in the distant past but over the past three years, as communities fight each other and militias prey on the general population.

Until the 'security transition' is recast as a transition from the goals of foreign troop-contributing countries to the concerns of the Afghan population, the rising tide of insecurity is unlikely to be reversed.



Photo credit: Marcin Bondarowicz

Donor-drive

The use of international aid to rebuild Afghanistan remains the most glaring example of a policy that is driven by the needs of donors rather than that of the Afghan population. An example of this is the underfunded 'urgent humanitarian appeal' launched by the UN for the past three years. Though the international community spends billions of dollars in Afghanistan each year, the humanitarian appeal identifying the most urgent requirements goes underfunded though it amounts to far less (USD 666 million in 2009, USD 775 million in 2010 and USD 678 million in 2011). This is because the bulk of aid continues to be spent bilaterally by donors following political and military objectives (see *Himal August 2010*, '[Conferences, calendars and caveats](#)').

Major donors route their aid to the areas where their troops are based, and to sectors on which they would like to focus. Some, such as the US, make sure that a considerable portion of this money returns to American corporations. The commonly acknowledged rate of money returning back to the Western donor is between 40 and 50 percent. Beneficiary citizens ultimately receive a fraction of the original amount, with the rest going to overheads at each level of the sub-contracting process. The money leaks out in inflated salaries as well as inflated costs. The sub-contracting culture also means that the money reaches the final implementer very late, due to delays at each stage of the contracting process. Based on the donor's annual budgetary cycle, the money is then required to be spent quickly, resulting in projects executed in a hurry, often shoddily.

Most donor countries have a system of accountability, but again, they answer to their own governments and elected representatives, not the Afghan beneficiaries. There are almost no mechanisms that allows the beneficiaries to have a say in aid projects, or how they are executed. The sight of private contractors executing projects while using hired guns to keep the 'beneficiary population' at bay is a common sight in Afghanistan. The system ensures that information about failed projects or misappropriation of money comes through only intermittently. Instances of companies being penalised because of complaints of beneficiaries, whether for badly constructed school buildings or inoperable water canal project are unheard of.

In fact, establishing accountability is not that hard, even within the existing remit. For example, Integrity Watch Afghanistan (IWA), an Afghan civil-society organisation, started a project in 2007 that empowers local communities to monitor projects being executed in their name with donor or government money. The community selects trustworthy members who are trained in the task of monitoring, to ensure there are no compromises in the quality of the projects. IWA also enabled the local monitor groups to go up the chain of contractors, to obtain information from the donor as necessary. The popularity of the process is evident from the growing demands on IWA to train communities throughout the country. Nevertheless, such initiatives are rare and receive inadequate support from the donors.

Peace before justice

The absence of the Afghan citizen is most starkly evident in the current mantra of 'reconciliation'. As the Western coalition seeks to exit, it is compromising on the small political, civil, democratic and human-rights gains made by and for the Afghan population since 2001. While rhetorical homage is being paid to the Constitution and the so-called 'red lines' that will prevent compromise on the most fundamental of rights for the Afghan people, the actual rollback of these rights is taking place even now on the international community's watch.

In 2005, for example, the international community, led by the UN, had extended robust support to a Transitional Justice Action Plan. It focused on prosecution for war crimes, reparation for losses, and acknowledgement of the suffering of victims as a means of reconciling citizens and bringing a sense of closure to the past. In 2007, the international community opposed the adoption of a law that sought to provide blanket amnesty to all participants in the conflict, pointing out that the law was against the principles of justice and human rights and violated international humanitarian principles. In 2010, however, with the focus shifting to reconciliation with the armed opposition, the concerns of citizens received short shrift. The amnesty law has indeed been adopted by Kabul, with scarcely a murmur from the international community. In fact, the UN itself has put peace before transitional justice, not only delinking peace and justice but also suggesting that the two were mutually exclusive in the current context.

Meanwhile, there is escalating violence against women, reversing the trend of the initial post-Taliban years. Opinion surveys show support for women's work outside the home has dropped, as has support for women in Parliament. The parliamentary elections of 2010 – which dragged on messily for over four months - demonstrated the international community's changing posture. In the name of 'Afghanisation' of the electoral process, the international community decided to step back from its stated goal of strengthening the electoral institutions and processes. Though at the time *Himal* went to press a resolution under international pressure looked likely, it was not before the democratic process had been put through the wringer, setting a bad precedent for the future. To stem this deterioration, the international community needs to do more to support the efforts of Afghan civil-society organisations, which have been voicing demands for a spectrum of rights – rights that are being marginalised in the hasty exit strategy.

Rather than treating human rights and democracy as inconvenient principles that need to be shelved or circumvented in the short term, the international community needs to look at the country's long-term stability by supporting policies that would reflect the country's complex and pluralistic social and political fabric, and by strengthening democracy, rule of law, justice and an inclusive polity. By proffering 'Afghanisation' as the reason for not playing its part, the international community is being disingenuous. For better or worse, it is international aid money that is the current dominant determinant in Afghanistan. By picking and choosing individuals, institutions and forces it wants to fund, it is the international community that shapes the Afghanistan of today – and moulds the Afghanistan of tomorrow.

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