

## Afghanistan's future in peril

BBC NEWS- 8 /9/2009

By Ahmed Rashid in Islamabad

**Mass fraud and ballot-box stuffing in the recent elections has thrown international commitment to Afghanistan into peril, says guest columnist Ahmed Rashid.**

Claims of mass fraud and ballot-box stuffing during the 20 August presidential elections has plunged Afghanistan into a deep political and constitutional crisis for which neither the Afghan leadership nor the Americans or the UN have any easy answer.

The rigging was assured months ago when President Hamid Karzai began to ally himself with regional warlords, drug traffickers and top officials in the provinces who were terrified of losing their jobs and their lucrative sinecures, if President Karzai lost.

The reports coming in from around the country but especially from the Pashtun south - the heartland that voted for Mr Karzai overwhelmingly in 2004 - are becoming more indisputable every day.

Supporters of both Mr Karzai and leading contenders like Dr Abdullah are all alleged to have carried out ballot-box stuffing after voting ended on 20 August.

**“ There have to be Afghan partners on the ground to help implement a minimalist state building strategy ”**

It is a sad denouement for a man whose humility and moderation touched everyone when he was chosen as interim president in the Bonn talks in 2001.

Despite Afghanistan's backwardness, only a democratic set-up can prevent a return to civil war and ethnic conflict.

However what is now at jeopardy is the entire international commitment to Afghanistan, the danger of ethnic and political warfare, assassinations and bombings between rival candidates and an increase in the Taliban-led insurgency as they smell victory.

### Anger and criticism

Today there is a growing debate in Washington and European capitals about what constitutes success in Afghanistan, and whether it is worth backing a Afghan leadership which has shown itself unable to come up to the real task of leading.

In Washington there is for the first time anger and criticism at the Obama plan that was announced only in March.

Will American and European public opinion hold up long enough for his plan to work and how many more troops, how much more money will be needed?

Unfortunately the election results have only strengthened the arguments of many dissenters in Washington who are insistent that the Afghans are incapable of learning and unwilling to build a modern state and Afghan society should be left well alone.

Unfortunately the same dissenters do not sufficiently criticise the past policy failures of President George Bush

which have led Afghanistan to this impasse and the dissenters do not offer solutions.

So what needs to be done?

Firstly the American and European people need to be told the truth.

How their governments have failed them in Afghanistan over the past eight years, why so little nation-building and reconstruction has been done, and why insufficient troops and money were spent in Afghanistan as compared to Iraq.

Governments also need to explain how the terrorist threat has grown and al-Qaeda now covers much of Africa and Europe while the Taliban have become a brand name that stretches deep into Pakistan and Central Asia, and in the future could possibly extend into India and China.

Secondly rebuilding the Afghan state and economy must be tackled at breakneck speed.

Much of this is now understood by President Obama. His plan, for the first time places emphasis on things like agriculture, job creation and justice. However will Obama be given the time to carry out his plans?

The insurgency can never be finished as long as the insurgents enjoy a safe haven.

The Afghan Taliban were made welcome in Pakistan in 2001 when they retreated from Afghanistan and are still made welcome because of a certain logic put forward by the Pakistan army, which mainly involves containing India's growing power in the region and in Afghanistan in particular.

President Bush treated then President Pervez Musharraf with kid gloves.

In recent months the army has now shifted its stance to take on the Pakistani Taliban in a determined fashion - since April the army has lost 312 soldiers and killed some 2,000 Pakistani Taliban.

Yet still there is no strategic shift by the army to take on the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda in their safe havens in the tribal areas that border Afghanistan.

### **No breakthrough**

Despite the regional strategy that is being pursued by the US, there is still no breakthrough with Pakistan, while India acts tough towards Islamabad offering the Americans little room to manoeuvre.

There is no easy way out of this quandary except more time, greater trust-building and more international aid to Pakistan.

Lastly there have to be Afghan partners on the ground to help implement a minimalist state-building strategy.

Unfortunately President Bush ignored that for too long - the lack of good governance, the corruption, the growth of the drugs trade and the failure to build representative institutions were all ignored.

To emerge from this mess with even moderately credible Afghan partners will be extremely difficult, but it has to be done because without a partner the US becomes nothing but a naked occupation force which Afghans will resist and Nato will not want to be a part of.

The only answer once the final tally for the elections is made is a national government of all Afghan stake holders.