

Afghanistan 2004 - The Year Ahead

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By Ahmed Rashid

The lack of security and the failure of the international community to disburse adequate funds for the reconstruction of Afghanistan will continue to dominate the concerns of the government of President Hamid Karzai in 2004. In the early spring of 2004 a bruising battle will ensue over the issue of early Presidential elections. The US administration, which has delivered an additional US 1.2 billion dollars this year bringing its total to US 2 billion for 2003-2004 and intends to set up 6 more Provincial Reconstruction Teams in the Pashtun belt along the border with Pakistan to improve security, will insist that Presidential elections must be held by September at the latest.

On the other hand the UN, many European and NATO states, Western and Afghan Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) and many Afghans including at least half the Afghan cabinet say elections should be postponed for at least one year. However with the backing of a reluctant Karzai, Washington's agenda which is all to do with having a success story to show to American voters in November 2004 for the US Presidential elections, is likely to win out.

The key issue for the credibility of any such Presidential elections which are likely to be held in September 2004, will be how much participation there will be in the strife torn Pashtun belt. An equally difficult task will be the deepening and broadening of the disarming and demobilization of 100,000 militiamen, which has only just begun. Unless the government and the international community push ahead with this, the power of the warlords and gunmen will remain unchecked.

The December Loya Jirga which will ratify a Presidential style Constitution has already done much to change the ethnic imbalances that existed in the country after the war against the Taliban. The LJ has seen the return of the Pashtuns, as monarchists, democrats and fundamentalist Pashtuns rally around a Presidential system and a powerful central government, which they equate with a resurgence of Pashtun political power. The Tajik Panjsheris have lost considerable clout. Unable to dominate the LJ, they are divided amongst themselves and do not have the degree of popularity that existed for them after September 11. Karzai will face the tough decision of either including Defense Minister Mohammed Fahim as Vice President on his ticket for the presidential elections or dumping him in favor of a more popular non-Pashtun and creating several Vice-Presidents to maintain ethnic harmony.

The December LJ has demonstrated that the non-Taliban fundamentalists led by Burhanuddin Rabbani and Abdul Rasul Sayyaf are still powerful due to the intimidation they exercise and they will continue to push on Islamic issues by using the highly conservative Afghan judiciary to support their pro-sharia demands. This will prove to be a major hindrance for progressive Afghans to push ahead with democratic and human rights reforms and create embarrassing moments for the government also. At the December LJ, a powerful block of non-Pashtuns in northern and north-eastern Afghanistan have become untied around their common demands for more provincial autonomy and greater checks on Presidential powers. The common ground found by Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmens and Hazaras has surprised both the government and the Americans and this block will continue to push for greater recognition of their demands, albeit in a peaceful manner.

Karzai will have to deal with these new ethnic shifts in a more democratic and concessionary way than before, while at the same time ensuring that the Pashtuns do not return to an overlordship over other ethnic groups. If the government deals with these issues in a mature fashion, it could herald the start of real and genuine democratic debate rather than issues being forced by the gun. Although the government would like to see a Tokyo Two conference in the spring of 2004, in a pledging conference, which Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani says must raise his new estimate of US 30 billion dollars over the next 15 years for Afghanistan's reconstruction, a much higher level of commitment is needed to take place. There is a deep reluctance by Western

the Americans for determining the agenda in Afghanistan without including them in decision making. The lack of funding for reconstruction and the continued emphasis on Iraq by the international community will remain a major problem for the government. However with GDP growth at 29 percent for 2002-3 and estimated at 20 percent for 2003-4 according to the IMF, the Kabul government is likely to push for more foreign and Afghan ex-patriot investment in order to make up the shortfalls in international aid. Ghani and Trade Minister Kazemi are determined to make Afghanistan a center point for transit trade between the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia and they have notched up considerable successes so far.

Pakistan will face renewed US and international pressure to curtail its open support for the Taliban resurgence. US plans for early elections in Afghanistan are premised on the fact that US pressure will force the Pakistani military and the ISI to start reigning in the Taliban by the spring, who are mostly operating from Pakistani soil. Pakistan, already under international pressure because of its alleged nuclear technology sales to Iran and North Korea will now face concerted US demands that it can only remain a respected part of the global alliance against terrorism, if it arrests not just Al'Qaeda elements but also the key Taliban leaders who are organizing the resistance against Karzai and mostly live in the Quetta region.

If Pakistan carries out such measures in good faith, its relations can improve with the Karzai administration with the added incentives of playing a more prominent role in trade and reconstruction contracts. However if Pakistan drags its feet on the much needed policy turnaround, Afghan anger and suspicion at Pakistan which is already at an all time high, will only be reinforced, allowing India to make further headway in Afghanistan and ensuring that Pakistan-US relations remain on a roller coaster. The refusal of NATO which now controls the International Security Assistance Force in Kabul, to provide more troops so that security can be enhanced in other Afghan cities will be a major negative factor for the Afghan government. The PRTs planned by the Americans will barely be sufficient to provide the necessary security needed by the UN and NGOs to start serious development work in the Pashtun belt, which remains the most deprived part of the country.

Afghanistan is slowly on the road to stability. The two essential processes of nation building and state building are taking place although the pace is slowed down by the lack of international commitment on building security and providing adequate funding.