

Karzai Takes On The Warlords

The Nation - 11/08/2002

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Early one morning this month President Hamid Karzai walked into his office in the Presidential Palace and found some of his American trained Afghan bodyguards sleeping in his office. A stunned Karzai asked them what they were doing - 'ensuring the security of your office' they replied. Guarding an empty room is just one of the extraordinary precautions being taken to protect Karzai. Heavily built US bodyguards with forearms as thick as tires and carrying guns that look like weapons from Star Wars, follow his every move during the day and vet anyone who comes in through the Palace gates.

After an assassin tried to kill Karzai in Kandahar last September, several Arab and Afghan suicide bombers with explosive belts strapped to their waist and belonging to Al'Qaeda have been arrested in Kabul. Afghan intelligence officials say they all wanted to attain paradise by killing either Karzai or his Defense Minister General Mohammed Fahim. Karzai takes enormous risks every day, but now that he finally appears ready to take on the warlords and improve the country's worsening security situation - his aides are anxious that he take even more precautions.

After months of apparent inaction Karzai is finally confronting the warlords in the regions outside Kabul. Backed by the US and the UN, he is pushing through plans to disarm and demobilize their troops next spring when major reconstruction projects worth nearly US 1 billion dollars will start around the country; he is seeking ways to extend the country's fledgling bureaucracy to outlying areas with the help of US troops: he has plans to undermine the black-smuggling economy that provides the warlords with income and leaves government coffers empty, while an independent commission is writing a constitution for the country which has to be ready by October 2003.

After he was elected President of the Afghan transitional government in June by the Loya Jirga, Western and Afghan critics were right in saying that Karzai remained the ruler of only Kabul and was declining to use his newly established legitimacy to act decisively against the warlords, but in the last few weeks he has taken several decisive and immensely risky steps to assert himself and his government's authority.

"The warlords know that they cannot survive without the center and they are not strong enough to challenge the center - there may be acts of defiance but no challenge," says Karzai in an interview in his office, as delegations of Afghan tribal leaders, ministers and Western diplomats stream through his office in a never ending parade.

"We call the shots, they (warlords) don't call the shots, but there is a huge disconnect between the central government authority and the lack of an administration - we need to fill that gap

very quickly and I need good, trained people who are in short supply right now,” he adds.

In December alone Karzai has dismissed 29 corrupt officials in the provinces, passed a decree that forbids warlords from having both a political and military role in the provinces - they must choose one - while another decree orders that the mammoth tasks of disarming and demobilizing warlords armies should be completed by June 2003.

So far the results have been mixed. Some 10 officials have refused to resign. In the north eastern province of Kunduz General Mohammed Daud, helped by UN officials has already collected 6000 arms, but in the south the powerful warlord General Ismail Khan has refused to disarm people or his army of 25,000 men. Some warlords have accepted Karzai's order to give up either their political or military role, others pretend not to have heard about the decree. Says Karzai, “the bottom line is that nobody has the gall to reject government order but some work according to Afghan time.”

Acting much against public opinion, after the Loya Jirga Karzai co-opted several warlords into the government including Generals Abdur Rashid Dostum and Mohammed Atta in the north of the country, Gul Agha Sherzai in Kandahar and Ismail Khan in the west. Karzai says he does not think it was a wrong strategy, but admits he under estimated public criticism and hatred for the warlords.

“Politically speaking the people are way ahead of us, the demands they make upon us are enormous and they understand the need for a central government,” says Karzai. “People are looking at the center to give them a change for the better, they are not looking at the warlords,” he adds.

Karzai has also done some blunt talking to the Americans, insisting that they must distance themselves from the warlords, many of whom were supported by US forces, money and supplies during the war against the Taliban and continue to receive US funding and salaries for their troops for resisting Al'Qaeda. “The US needs a new strategy putting its weight with the government rather than dividing it between the warlords and the government,” says a senior aide to Karzai.

The key to dealing with the warlords will be in building the new army. “We have been saying for a long time that security sector reform is the key issue for consolidation of peace in Afghanistan,” says Lakhdar Brahimi the UN Secretary General's Special Representative to Afghanistan. “The creation of a new national army and demobilization is the center piece,” he adds.

The problem so far has been the other power center in Kabul - the Ministry of Defense (MOD) run by the Tajik faction from the valley of Panjshir north of Kabul led by General Mohammed Fahim. He has procrastinated over the modalities of building a new Afghan National Army (ANA) in which the US has the lead role and in demobilizing his own army, which constitutes the largest in the country and without which other warlords will refuse to disarm.

However US and UN military officers say there has been an enormous change in Fahim's thinking over the past few months. Fahim now insists he is working with Karzai, the UN and the US. "There is no real opposition to these principles of moving towards strengthening the central government and exercising greater control through demobilization and arms collection and building the ANA," says Fahim.

Next month Fahim will visit Washington for the first time. He says he will ask the US to extend its training of troops for the ANA from just Kabul to seven training centers around the country so the process can be speeded up. So far only 2000 of a 70,000 planned ANA have been trained. "Demobilization has to run parallel to building a new army, but a UN program has to provide livelihoods or income for those phased out troops - it all depends on how fast the UN can go," says Fahim.

Says the UN's Sultan Aziz who is tasked with running demobilization, "it's a very complex issue because you have to both demobilize troops, deprive the warlords of their illegal income and come up with serious income options for the demobbed troops. We have the money and a plan we are working with the central government." Gul Agha, the Kandahar warlord collects some US 50,000 dollars a day or US 18 million dollars a year from customs and tax revenues which should go to the central government. Ismail Khan collects over US 50 million dollars a year the same way.

Japan, Canada, Sweden and other countries have so far pooled some US 80 million dollars for demobilization. Some demobbed troops will be inducted into the new army, others will be pensioned off, while others will be trained in new skills. But there is still strong disagreement over numbers. The MOD insists that there are over 200,000 troops to be demobilized but international experts think the real number is around 50,000. "In a country where everyone is armed, the nightmare scenario is that everyone pretends to be a soldier and tries to get a pay off," says Aziz.

Moreover General Fahim still has to be tested that his words match his deeds. The US is funding a major reform of the MOD, which is still dominated by Panjsheri officers. For the past three months the UN, the US and Karzai have been trying to get Fahim to replace at least 33 senior officers in the MOD with those from other ethnic groups.

"We are committed to creating an ethnic balance in the MOD and I will stick to my commitments to reorganize the MOD," says Fahim. However Fahim still has to implement the changes, start the demobilization of his own troops and surrender the enormous quantities of heavy weapons he has stockpiled in the Panjshir valley to the new ANA.

The added pressure on the warlords to change their ways is the expectancy that by next March major reconstruction projects will begin. Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani says the rebuilding of 3760 kilometers of roads will start and offer huge employment opportunities, the learning of new skills and allow the central government to extend its writ.

Ghani plans to pump US 300 million dollars into aid programs for rural areas including spending on health, education, power supply, irrigation and micro-credit schemes for farmers - a move that will further undermine the warlords. "Aid is coming but its not being evenly distributed at the present," says Ghani. "I want Afghanistan to stand on its own feet and generate its own wealth so that we can contribute to the world economy rather than being a burden upon it," he adds.

The biggest unknown remains the potential of Al'Qaeda and the Taliban to launch guerrilla attacks against US bases and government offices in the south and east of the country. These attacks have escalated in the past few weeks and the more the government spreads its writ through development projects, the more targets the extremists will have to shoot at.

Despite the problems Karzai is still immensely popular and people still expect him rather than the warlords or the extremists to deliver development that will change their lives. "Politics has to have some moral standing," says Karzai. "The Taliban had no moral standing, so they could destroy the country but not build it - the people recognize the difference between them and us," he says.