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BACKGROUND 2009-08E

**2009 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION
IN AFGHANISTAN**

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THE NETHERLANDS

Afghanistan's next president

The presidential election in Afghanistan originally were planned to be held in April 2009, but as general security in the country has decreased dramatically over the last few years it was decided to await the announced arrival of 21.000 fresh US troops. The first batch of US marines arrived in May; the presidential and provincial council elections will now be held on August 20.¹

Every candidate for the presidency is required to fulfil five conditions: possess Afghan citizenship, be a Muslim, be at least 40 years of age, hand over a list to the Independent Election Commission (IEC) with 10.000 signatures endorsing the candidacy, and make a deposit of 1.000 US dollars. Initially, 44 contenders for probably one of the most difficult jobs in the world applied, including two women. In the presidential election of 2004 18 candidates participated.

After the registration-office closed on May 8, for a period of two weeks every Afghan had the opportunity to protest against certain candidates taking part. Those accused then got the opportunity to defend themselves; after that, the Electoral Complaints Commission announced on June 9 which candidates were refused, and on what grounds.² This long-winded procedure serves to guarantee the elections will be as 'clean' as possible; quite a number of local militia-leaders and former warlords with dubious pasts nowadays are members of parliament.

On June 16 campaigning has started, to be ended on August 18, two day before the actual polling takes place. Next to formal demands, it mostly is informal conditions and backgrounds that determine a candidates' success; what are these? Another big question mark is, how many of Afghanistan's 16 million eligible voters will cast their vote; after nearly eight years in power, outgoing president and main contender Karzai and his nation are still faced with numerous grim issues. What future circumstances will the newly elected president have to face?

Bonn: a new dawn?

At the end of 2001, the conservative-Islamic Taliban regime and its notorious ally Osama bin Laden and his Arabic warriors were ousted by fighters of the so-called 'Northern Alliance', with the crucial support of American logistics and bombardments. A moderate Pashun tribal leader, Hamid Karzai, was installed as interim-president of Afghanistan.

At an almost euphoric UN-Conference in Bonn, held in December 2001, a number of political agreements were laid down in a tight schedule.³ First, a national meeting ('Loyah Jirgah') was to be called together to develop and approve a new constitution. Thereafter, presidential and parliamentary elections would be held. A limited contingent of foreign troops, the International Security Assistance Force or ISAF, was to be stationed in Afghanistan, mainly in and near the cities of Kabul and Kandahar. The main task of these troops, mostly British and American but also originating from other NATO-countries, would be to maintain peace.

In order to support the interim-administration in its reconstruction-effort of a largely devastated country Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT's) were established. They had to assist in the repair of irrigational systems (of crucial importance in a largely agrarian country), road-construction, the building of schools and hospitals. Unfortunately, quite a number of projects were carried out badly, or not even finished at all. Considerable amounts of money leaked away to the bank-accounts of private companies and NGO's, without any work being done or much help offered in return. Practises like these attributed to undermining the fragile authority of the government. Time and again the Karzai-administration turned out to be fully dependent on foreign support.

Elections and ethnicity

At the first free and largely fair presidential election in October 2004 of Afghanistan conciliatory-minded Hamid Karzai obtained over 55 percent of all votes.⁴ On December 7, 2004 Karzai was solemnly installed as president and the leader of government. During his first tenure he was seconded by vice-presidents Ahmed Zia Massud, a Tajik and brother of the legendary military leader of the Northern Alliance Ahmed Shah Massud (who got murdered on September 9), 2001, and Abdul Karim Khalili, the most prominent leader of the Hezaras. Thus, two out of three of the largest ethnic minorities of Afghanistan were represented on the highest level of government. The Uzbek leader Rashid Dostum became vice-chief of Staff.

Representation and active participation in the national political process by the Tajik population, but also from Hezaras and Uzbeks, is of major importance. Tajiks under the leadership of Ahmed Shah Massud for years have been the main force within the Northern Alliance; it was the only adversary left for the Taliban inside the country. Their role in removing the Taliban-regime can hardly be overstated.

In December 2005 parliamentary elections were held, a new parliament got installed in Kabul. These

elections were remarkably successful, owing to an unexpectedly large voter attendance. The Afghan 'Wolesi Jirgah' or House of the People (Lower House or House of Representatives) is made up of 249 members. The 'Meshrano Jirgah' or House of Elders counts 102 seats. After both presidential and parliamentary elections had delivered the much hoped-for results the Bush-administration apparently assumed that some sort of 'democratic process' had begun to take root in Afghanistan. In many Western capitals the eventual defeat of the Taliban-movement and the warlords of the country were taken for granted. As President Bush stated on July 4, 2002: "In Afghanistan, we have defeated the Taliban".

Nothing could have been farther from the truth. Nor the leadership of Al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden and his 'Arabs' neither the leadership of the Taliban, mullah Omar and his entourage, had been eliminated. In spite of several large-scale military operations against them in the Tora Bora border area, they succeeded in escaping to neighbouring Pakistan, largely unharmed. Both the Taliban and Al-Qaeda were chased out of Afghanistan, but they were not eradicated.

Soon after the rapid demise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Bush-administration put its main focus on the destruction of the regime of Saddam Hussain in Iraq. Although Hussain militarily was equally easy defeated, resistance in Iraq would continue for a number of years to come. This required the US to invest huge military and financial means to at least 'pacify' Iraq – resulting in a loss of interest and means concerning Afghanistan. As 2002 progressed, the Bush-government intensified its 'War on Terror', seeking to destroy Al-Qaeda as well. This silent, unannounced redirection of American priorities concerning its main foreign policy aims had far-reaching consequences for Afghanistan and, indeed, the whole of South Asia.⁵ Interim-president Karzai was faced with a factual decline of support from his main ally, the United States.

Obstacles: the Pakistan-connection

In the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan inhabited by numerous Pashtun tribes, part of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) directly bordering on Afghanistan, the Pakistani government never succeeded in establishing its writ.⁶ Here, with their ethnic brethren, the fleeing Pashtun of the Taliban-movement and their Arabic companions found shelter.⁷ As the efforts of the American government were increasingly aimed at bringing Iraq under control, both the Taliban-movement and Al-Qaeda started to regroup and rebuild.

Many of the thousands of madrassas (religious schools) in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border area

served, and still serve, as recruiting centres and training camps for the Taliban. Strong financial support from Arab countries, Saudi Arabia being the main contributor, enabled the Taliban to re-arm. They received military instruction and training from members of the Pakistani Secret Service (Inter Service Intelligence or ISI). Inside ISI, the Taliban could count on a number of staunch allies who, for a variety of reasons, readily supported militant Islamic groupings like the Taliban. Already in the eighties the number of madrassas and mosques in the border area has been increasing rapidly. Through this expanding network militancy, training facilities and arms were spread.⁸

Another extremely important development that enabled the Afghan Taliban to regroup and regain strength was the instalment of a conservative-Islamic provincial government in the NWFP in 2002. Being based on a coalition of conservative Islamic Pakistani parties, and being narrowly associated with many of its Afghan counterparts, it openly provided sympathy and support for the Taliban. Increasingly, groups of Taliban fighters crossed the border into Afghanistan to carry out attacks on Afghan government officials and buildings, overwhelmingly in the eastern and southern provinces of the country. The limited Western military contingent could do little; when militants were hotly pursued they could simply run back to safe haven Pakistan, rendering ISAF largely powerless since its troops were not allowed to cross the border.

The wished-for future political system in Afghanistan had been put down in detailed writing in Bonn, 2001. A top down democratic political structure should be developed, starting with an elected president. The president appoints ministers and provincial governors. This enabled Karzai to develop an ethnically balanced administration, an absolute precondition for arriving at a unified country as well as for a balanced national government. On the other hand these almost unlimited presidential powers may easily provoke political opposition, especially when a president rules too heavy-handed. Another disadvantage of this 'presidential' system is that provincial governors are answerable to the president, instead of the electorate in the provinces.

As a consequence, presidential prerogatives like these led to the repeated appointment of potential political allies and friends as governor, among them a number of former, notorious warlords. Quite a number of provincial governors would never have been elected in direct provincial elections. To the august goal of developing democracy this strongly centralised system created numerous obstacles; but it certainly did fit in with the Afghan political traditions. Here, some seeds of future conflicts between Western wishes and Afghan practise were sown.

Formerly, when a strong Pashtun ruler led the country, the interests of the ethnic minorities were seldom acknowledged, let alone taken into account. The desired development of a Pashtun dominated central

authority in Western capitals and the UN headquarters will hardly motivate the other ethnic groupings of the country to wholeheartedly participate in the process of political modernisation and democratisation.

Apart from a political timetable an equally ambitious plan has been designed at the UN-Conference in Bonn for the creation of a wholly new political system, a new judiciary system, the building of an effective new Afghan army and the creation of a strong Afghan police force. The instalment of a huge administrative system of civil servants, practically absent in Afghanistan for years, was another wished for requirement. Unfortunately, all of this demanded steady streams of international financial means which, in spite of repeated promises at regularly held international donor-conferences, were simply not at hand. One consequence turned out to be that local courts of justice, if they were established at all, were hardly able to pay the salaries of their employees. Training programs were entirely out of the question. Since few local courts were established, local communities increasingly came to rely on the rudimentary versions of Sharia law and order as provided by the Taliban.

A high level of corruption is another obstacle on the road to stability and democracy. Ministers, governors and district officials were able to obtain all kinds of privileges for their political allies, family members and ethnic relatives. Whether it was about the smuggling of luxury goods, the building of a road, a hospital or a private bungalow, or turning a blind eye to drugs deals and smuggling, it left a major part of the population out in the cold. Not surprisingly, they felt little affinity with the new government in Kabul. Repeatedly Karzai was forced to sack corrupt or stubborn governors. Even some members of his own family are reportedly involved in the drugs trade, his brother Ahmad Wali campaigning in the southern provinces for him, for instance.

Candidates: Karzai⁹

Afghanistan, since its inception as an autonomous state in 1747, has always been inhabited by a rich variety of peoples and tribes. The Pashtun tribes which mainly live in the southern and eastern parts of the country, today make up about 42 % of Afghanistan's population of 33 million.¹⁰ The Tajiks, mainly living in the Northern provinces, are the second largest group. They constitute about 27 % of all Afghans. The Shiite Hezaras (practically all other Afghans are Sunnites) constitute approximately 9 % of the entire population, just like the Uzbeks. Taken together, all minorities outnumber the majority Pashtun population.

Ethnic numbers and strength have always determined the influence and positions of all groups within

the central government. Traditionally, the Pashtun provide national leadership, whether through a king or a president. The Taliban-movement, which was in power in Kabul between 1999 and 2001, also is basically Pashtun made. As such, it fitted in with a century's old tradition of alternating periods of strong and weak leadership. The ethnic minorities seldom succeeded in making themselves an influence within the national government. The mere fact that this, to a certain extent, did happen in the early years of the first Karzai-administration was owed to the non-Pashtun troops of the Northern Alliance that took Kabul in December 2001.

Clearly, President Karzai will not be supported by all members of his own ethnic community. However, being a major Pashtun leader he will certainly be preferred to non-Pashtun presidential candidates. At the previous presidential election in 2004 Karzai succeeded in obtaining about 90% of all votes from provinces like Logar, Paktia, Khost, Paktika, Zabul Kandahar, Helmand and Nimruz. These provinces are largely inhabited by Pashtun. The same ethnic principle by and large applies to other candidates, although in October 2004 a substantial amount of Tajik and Uzbek votes was cast for Karzai.

On August 20, a considerable part of all Hezaras is expected to support Karzai; their main leader, Khalili, presently is one of Karzai's vice-presidents, and is running as such again. Another well-known Hezara leader, Muhammad Mohaqiq, campaigns for Karzai as well. Also, a number of Uzbek and Hezara prominents have publicly declared their support for Karzai.¹¹ At the end of July four candidates have withdrawn; three of them spoke out for Karzai. The expectation is that more candidates will follow their example.¹² Karzai's main contender, Tajik leader Abdullah Abdullah, recently received a boost as well; a considerable number of followers of the Uzbek Jumbesh-e-Milli Party led by one of Karzai's traditional allies, Abdul Rashid Dostum, declared their support for Abdullah.¹³ On the other hand, at a late hour, former warlord and actual strongman Ismael Khan in Herat province, which borders Iran, decided to back Karzai.¹⁴

All in all, Karzai still is the front runner, in spite of all unresolved issues and problems that still trouble the country. In an attempt to gain the Uzbek's vote Karzai reinstated the controversial former warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum as his Chief of Staff of the Afghan army. Dostum, living in Turkey, on the eve of the elections has returned to northern Afghanistan, if only to discipline his political party Jumbesh-e-Milli. Talks about future cooperation have also been conducted between the former US ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad and Hamid Karzai. Both men have known each other for many years. Although Khalilzad, an American citizen of Pashtun origin (he was born in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif), did not register as a presidential candidate (in which case he would have had to abandon his American citizenship), he may occupy an important post in

the next Karzai-administration. It is rumoured that he may be appointed as prime minister, at present a non-existent function. The appointment of Khalilzad will likely increase direct US influence on the Afghan government. A number of Karzai's ministers have already voiced their opposition against this.¹⁵

Karzai will have little space for extensive political manoeuvring. Delegating political powers to provincial officials or non-Pashtun ethnic groups will immediately backfire; the major Pashtun tribes would not accept this. How many Pashtun tribes support the Taliban movement cannot be readily determined. It is clear, however, that a considerable majority of all Afghan Pashtun still does not wish to identify with the main political aims of the Taliban-movement. Therefore, the repeated summonses of Taliban leader mullah Omar not to vote may meet with little success; equally little results are to be expected from Karzai's repeated summonses to the Taliban to take part in the election.¹⁶

Owing to the ethnic variety of Afghanistan, its neighbouring countries have traditionally succeeded in exercising considerable influence on its national affairs. The Pashtuns have for long received substantial Pakistani support. Tajiks are supported by Tajikistan, Uzbeks receive considerable support from Uzbekistan and Turkey. Uzbeks and Tajiks generally do not get on well, both outside and inside Afghanistan. The minority of Shiite Hezaras are helped by Iran. More distant countries like Saudi-Arabia, India and the United States heavily involve themselves in the political, economic and religious affairs of Afghanistan as well.¹⁷ These unilateral interferences have repeatedly led to huge public protests, especially when American 'drones' (unmanned but armed aircrafts) or rocket launchings by the Taliban and their foreign supporters caused numerous civilian casualties. This did not just do damage to the popular support for continued Western military presence in the country but also discredits the Karzai-government, since 'collateral damage' like this is not seen to contribute to the enhancement of national security.

Civilian casualties, the increasing strength and presence of the Taliban, plus the continued dependence of a weak Karzai-government on foreign military and financial support, have raised serious doubts in Afghan minds about supporting the presence of increasingly large numbers of Western military in their country. Nevertheless, one important recent poll result shows that a majority of all Afghans, Pashtun included, still prefer continued Western military presence to a return to power of the Taliban.¹⁸

This may well result in another large voter turnout, provided the Afghan army and the western military succeed in securing a safe voting process. Taliban commanders have repeatedly announced that they will 'disturb' the elections. On August 10 six Taliban fighters attacked the governor's compound in Logar province; it houses the office of the Independent Election Commission as well. The province is located next to Kabul.

Reportedly, 200 suicide bombers will be attacking polling stations on Election Day.¹⁹

Under these circumstances, a large turnout of voters may well be considered as a renewed rejection of Taliban rule. As the Taliban continued to gain strength and established themselves in many parts of the country, practically occupying the entire eastern and southern parts of the country, at least since 2006 the overall security in Afghanistan has diminished considerably. At the same time, by now over 100.000 Western soldiers are already stationed in Afghanistan (two-third are Americans), making ISAF and NATO a formidable military force. They only started to arrive in 2007, after numerous previous, fruitless summonses to that end by an increasingly desperate president Karzai.

Karzai's rivals

Another major contender in the presidential election is the partly Tajik, partly Pashtun Abdullah Abdullah. He was educated as an eye surgeon. Of all candidates, Abdullah is one of the few of them who are considered to have 'clean hands', which gives him a clean, respectful image. Unlike Karzai, Abdullah does not receive any meaningful support from former warlords; he did not seek for it either. Former Tajik president Burhanuddin Rabbani does not qualify as such, after all.

Like one of Karzai's candidates for the vice-presidency, Tajik Mohammed Qasim Fahim, Abdullah for many years has been a close associate of Ahmed Shah Massud, the legendary, still immensely popular military leader of the Northern Alliance (which was re-baptised as the United front). Both men were befriended. Abdullah fully exploits this former friendship in his election campaign. In Karzai's interim government (2002-2004) Abdullah was Minister of Foreign Affairs. Differences of opinion with Karzai and the Bush-government about the future course of Afghan politics and developments in 2006 led to Abdullah's forced premature departure.

Abdullah, a moderate, was fully involved in the UN-Conference in Bonn as well. He was one of the major participatories in drafting the final agreement, and had suggested Karzai to be installed as interim-president. Being the main Tajik contender he will receive most Tajik votes. If he succeeds in acquiring substantial support from within other ethnic groups, Abdullah may well be a serious threat to Karzai's assumed first-round victory. The provinces where Abdullah is likely to obtain most of the votes are Ghor, Samangan, Baghlan, Parwan, Kapisa, Pansher and Badakshan, mainly Tajik inhabited in the northeast of the country. The most important swing provinces probably are Balkh, Kunduz, Takhar and possibly Ghazni.

Of course, Karzai seeks to get as many Tajiks on his side as he possibly can. Mincing little words, Abdullah describes the present Karzai-government as a failure, which actually caused the loss of a lot of popular support for both the government and democracy. In the ensuing power vacuum the Taliban found an opportunity to stage a comeback, leading to the present instability and insecurity in the country. Abdullah opines that the Afghans who join the Taliban do not do so because they want to destroy their country, but because they see it as the only way to fight corruption.²⁰ Unfortunately, destroying their country is precisely what they are doing.

A third candidate who may attract a solid amount of votes is Ashraf Ghani, a Pashtun of the large Ahmedzai tribe.²¹ Until recently, Ghani lived in the United States, pursuing a career at the World Bank. Ghani was narrowly involved in the UN-Conference in Bonn as well; he also helped to prepare the gathering of the 'Loyah Jirgah'. In the interim-government of 2002-2004 he functioned as Treasury Minister. Ghani wants to lure foreign investments to Afghanistan, rather than keep on depending on foreign support and charity. These days he heads the Institute for State Effectivity. Ghani promises to strongly promote 'peace and security, national sovereignty' and to strengthen national unity. He will combat corruption and raise the tax income of the central government. He has declared himself willing to cooperate with other contenders like Abdullah and Hezara leader Khalili, at present one of Karzai's two vice-presidents. If these candidates manage to combine their forces they may well be a viable alternative for Karzai. Following Karzai's bid, Abdullah has recently offered him the post of prime minister in his future government.

Apparently Karzai takes this political threat seriously, considering that he has offered Ghani an important post in his next cabinet, on the condition that he would halt his campaign. Although Ghani did not accept the offer, it serves to show that the Karzai team is not overly confident that it will win, at least not in the first round. Cooperation between Karzai and Ghani would undoubtedly strengthen the future government. The American government, not willing to be seen choosing sides, has also cautiously shown its endorsement.²² Washington's trust in Karzai has waned considerably over the years. Besides, Ashraf Ghani, being regarded as a 'technocrat', enjoys a solid reputation of being capable and competent.²³

Ghani has declared to be willing to join the next Karzai-government, on condition that he will be able to implement his political and economic programs. However, it is highly unlikely that Ghani will even get close to a cabinet-post; on his website, he has branded the Karzai-family as a mafia family, 'Karzai Incorporated', and in all likelihood will severely clash with Karzai's coterie of unscrupulous warlords.

Some more unlikely contenders have come up. The very first person to register as a candidate was

Shahnawaz Tania, a Pashtun, and a former general and minister in the communist government (1978-1992). In 1990 Tanai attempted to overthrow his political boss, Najibullah, but failed. These days, Tanai heads the 'Afghan Peace Movement'. Another noticeable contender for the post of Afghan president is Abdul Salam, alias Rocketi, a former member of the Taliban-regime that dominated the country from 1996 to 2001. Salam owns his alias 'Rocketi' to his special ability to extremely accurately fire missiles from his shoulder, demolishing quite a number of Soviet troops and vehicles. After the demise of the Taliban regime Abdul Salam has spent two years in jail. Apparently an enlightened man, he has decided to turn away from the Taliban; in 2005 he was chosen as a member of parliament.

Bullet-proof elections

As Election Day approaches, the much-hoped for 'bullet-proof' elections turn out to be illusory. A campaign leader of Abdullah Abdullah got killed when his car was attacked. In the Northern Province Kunduz vehicles in vice-presidential candidate Mohammad Qasim Fahim's vehicles were fired at with machineguns and RPG's (Rocket Propelled Grenades). Kunduz though, ethnically at least, belongs to Fahim's home base.

The attack was ascribed to the Taliban, as usual, but might well have been carried out by Tajik rivals of Fahim, trying to settle old scores. Other possible attackers may have been members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), who have recently fled from Pakistan. In the northern provinces of Afghanistan relatively few Taliban commanders are operating, but there is no shortage of local warlords and criminal organisations. A few weeks before, a member of the IEC (Election Commission) was killed. In the third week of July the German troops that are stationed in Kunduz initiated a military operation against all militant groups in the province. Apparently, it has not been very successful. On August 13, former president and actual Member of Parliament Burhanuddin Rabbani narrowly survived a grenade attack in Kunduz. Two days later NATO military headquarters in Kabul was severely damaged by a suicide car bomb; the target was the U.S. Embassy. Seven people were killed, dozens got injured. On August 18 the presidential palace and police headquarters were targeted by rockets; although nobody was injured, attacks like these have been rare in recent years. On the same day, a suicide bomber rammed his vehicle into an international military convoy, killing six people and wounding 44.²⁴

In Western eyes, Afghan election campaigning is a highly traditional affair. Candidates should extensively travel the country just in order to show themselves, giving as many potential supporters as possible

an opportunity to touch him, advise him, and lecture him. Political meetings often go on for hours. Considering the widespread illiteracy in Afghanistan (at least 72 % of the population is illiterate), this way of campaigning is the most effective one. Besides, neither Internet (accessible for only about 3 percent of all Afghans in 2009) nor televised debates are of major influence. In spite of the immense increase of private TV-stations in recent years only a minority of Afghans is able to watch and listen to televised debates. Most of the 37 candidates are not even invited to the studios.

Streets and squares of the villages and cities are papered over with campaign posters. Every candidate makes sure his image is to be seen everywhere; some candidates are happily accompanied by political friends. Usually each one of them is depicted with his or her specific election symbol. All contenders have their own symbol; Karzai, for instance, is shown with his pair of Scales. Abdullah regularly has Ahmed Shah Massud watching him approvingly from a corner of his posters. In many places outright 'poster' wars are being fought; posting teams put the posters of their candidate squarely over the other ones. As Election Day comes near less joyous Taliban posters increasingly appear, threatening reprisals to those who will vote in Thursday's presidential and provincial polls.²⁵

The threat of the Taliban issued in mosques, through radio announcements and leaflets (distributed by the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan') to disrupt the elections makes it practically impossible for all candidates to conduct an effective nation-wide campaign. But ethnically hostile areas should also be avoided; vice-president Khalili, for instance, will carefully avoid to campaign in the east and south of the country, where the Pashtun tribes live. Karzai and his election team have decided not to campaign in Helmand.

According to the head of the Independent Election Commission, Ahmed Nader Nadrey, eleven electoral districts in the south of the country are fully dominated by the Taliban. The Afghan Ministry of Defence, however, claims that their number has been reduced to nine, owing to the large American and British offensive in Helmand Province.²⁶ Another 124 electoral districts (totalling 390) are threatened by Taliban presence.²⁷ Obviously, under these circumstances it will be well-nigh impossible to conduct 'free and fair' elections, or even 'credible' ones. A considerable part of all approximately 16 million voters may decide not to show up in one of the 7000 polling stations after all.

To improve security, in a number of provinces the Afghan government attempts to recruit the services of local tribes and their fighters. In exchange for 150 US dollar a month per fighter, these tribal militias should safeguard polling stations and security in general, in order to guarantee an election-result as credible as possible. Militias like these are supposed to closely cooperate with both the Afghan army and the Afghan

police. They are allowed to use their own weapons, but will not receive them from the government.²⁸ Of course it is hoped that initiatives like these, when proven successful, will result in a permanent improvement of general security. Unfortunately, so far the effort has yielded few results.

The new president and the future

Whoever steps bravely forward after September 17 (the day the final results are expected to be announced) to be inaugurated as Afghanistan's next president will be immediately confronted with numerous severe problems. Almost eight years after the Taliban regime was ousted the ongoing struggle in Afghanistan is bloodier than ever before. In July, 2009 75 Western soldiers got killed, the highest number in one month since December 2001. Spokesman Qari Muhammad Yusuf of the Taliban recently issued a stern warning to president Karzai that he will be subjected to the same fate as previous 'collaborators', since he is an agent of the United States.²⁹ Former Afghan president Najibullah (1986-1992), for instance, was dragged out of the UN building in Kabul by Taliban fighters in September 1996, castrated and hung from a streetlamp in the heart of Kabul, together with his brother. It may be readily assumed that the Taliban have this appalling fate in mind for any other new president.

In his upcoming report to the Obama-government, to be presented to it only after the outcome of the Afghan presidential election is known, American commander of the forces in Afghanistan General McChrystal will assess and announce what the future military requirements for Afghanistan are. Since the end of 2001, the United States has poured 223 billion dollar into Afghan warfare; more money will be asked for.³⁰ In the same period, another 38 billion has been spend on reconstruction.³¹ At present, the country is controlled for one-third by the Taliban, for one-third by the government and international military forces, and for one-third is heavily disputed between both parties. One European think-tank has even stated as early as at the end of 2007 that the Taliban controlled over 70 % of the entire country.³² It is obvious that the Taliban are controlling large parts of the country, especially the areas outside the small number of Afghan cities. McChrystal recently declared that the Taliban 'have the momentum'. To be able to turn the tide McChrystal will at least need another 10.000 American troops after 2009, on top of the 68.000 mark that the number of US soldiers will have reached at the end of this year.

In Helmand province in the south of the country most of Afghanistan's poppies are grown. From this province alone, 45 % of all Afghan poppies originate. Since 2006, when the Taliban started to focus on

occupying Helmand, the number of violent attempts and kidnappings has risen considerably. Using the profits they make by selling drugs, possibly hundreds of millions of dollars, the Taliban are capable of financing many of their activities. Although President Karzai on the eve of his election in 2004 had vowed to conduct a 'jihad' against the growing and selling of drugs, poppy harvests have been increasing ever since. It contributed to the increased strength of the Taliban, as well as to a rise in crime.

It is of crucial importance that the large-scale offensive which has begun on July 2 by American and British troops will be successful. By pushing back the Taliban, it is hoped that the local Pashtun population will cast its vote on August 20. This directly increases Karzai's support base. In 2004, Karzai won a substantial amount of all votes in the southern provinces. If local security is seen to be lastingly improved, many voters may well be tempted to cast their vote for him once more, considerably enhancing the prospect of his re-election.

In the longer term, the growth of poppies and the drugs trade related to it (trade in opium and heroine) may receive a blow, thereby diminishing the financial means of the Taliban, as well. Another consequence of lasting improvement of the general security will be that the local population is able to concentrate on the growth of different crops, pomegranates or saffron, for instance. A limited but successful Dutch agricultural project in Uruzgan aims at growing and exporting saffron, like poppies a crop with high yields.³³

To enable projects like these to succeed, a long term presence of foreign and Afghan troops is an absolute necessity. This, in its turn, requires the continuous build-up of both a strong and efficiently operating Afghan army and police force. In spite of all means and efforts spent, both these organisations, especially the police force, are still negligible factors in the maintenance of security and peace.

After having come to power, the effective authority of the Karzai-government still is not established in the larger part of the country. In order to survive it needs the continuous presence of many thousands of Western soldiers and huge amounts of international financial support. Quite a number of Western countries, faced with an international economic and financial crisis themselves, are tired of the seemingly endless struggle in Afghanistan. At the end of July 2009, a poll held in Great-Britain revealed that 58 % of all Britons think that the war in Afghanistan cannot be won; 52 % of those interviewed wants all British troops (9.000, the largest contingent after the American one) withdrawn immediately.³⁴ On August 15, two more British soldiers got killed in Helmand province.³⁵ Only one day later three more British soldiers died when they were blown apart by a road-side device; 204 British soldiers now have lost their lives in Afghanistan, forcing prime minister

Gordon Brown to once more publicly defend the continued presence of British troops in Afghanistan.

Public opinion in many Western countries do exercise influence on the decisions of national governments, especially in European countries. Several countries have announced that they will withdraw their troops from Afghanistan in 2010, the Netherlands and Canada among them. Whether the Obama-administration, hesitant to commit extra means and forces anyway, will decide to send American troops to replace them is still unclear. What is clear, however, is that the build-up of the Afghan army progresses but slowly, and devours enormous amounts of money. Moreover, serious doubts are raised about the enduring loyalty of many freshly recruited soldiers.

During the next ten years, the United States is expected to spend at least 80 billion dollar on the build-up of an effective national Afghan army.³⁶ This approach is fully endorsed by Supreme Commander David Petraeus, who in the end is responsible for the success or failure of his armed forces. Petraeus has also declared that to his best knowledge 'moderate' Taliban do not exist; negotiating with the Taliban would merely result in undermining all efforts made by Western military.³⁷ (It would be quite interesting to finally learn whom president Obama, SC Petraeus and other key political and military leaders are specifically referring to when they think and talk aloud about 'moderate Taliban'.) This point of view is confirmed by the marginal success of the armistice the Afghan government has managed to conclude with Taliban commanders in the North Western Province of Badghis. Although it was readily promoted as a 'role model' for future armistices, it must be noted that there are but few Taliban in Badghis. Those Taliban that are active there immediately took the opportunity to ambush a number of local police officers.

An equally little promising announcement was made by Ahmad Wali Karzai on August 14, a younger half-brother of the President who is campaigning on his behalf in the southern provinces. Ahmad Wali claimed that, on his urging, community elders had spoken with Taliban commanders, who had promised not to disturb the upcoming election process. The agreements were with those Taliban who were 'not a part of al-Qaeda'.³⁸ Taliban spokesman Yousuf Ahmadi immediately denied that any such conversations had taken place at all. Once more, the diffuse nature of the Taliban movement, as well as that of 'allies' of the government, is shown.

Another huge problem will continue to be formed by the sheer presence of the neighbouring state of Taliban-infested Pakistan. The unguarded, open border with that country has enabled Afghan fighters to flee Afghanistan whenever they were cornered. In recent years, the internal political situation in Pakistan has considerably changed. The Pakistani Taliban has managed to significantly strengthen their positions, especially in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and the province of Balochistan, both of which border

Afghanistan. Afghan leaders of the Taliban are known to be present in the Balochi city of Quetta, supreme leader mullah Omar among them. Here, they are able to roam about practically unhindered. For obvious reasons, this is being vehemently denied by the Pakistani government.

The weakened position of both the Pakistani government and the army towards militant Taliban groupings in their own country have resulted in altering balances of military and political strength in entire South-Asia. Previously, the Bush-government (2001-2009) counted on its main ally, the Pakistani army of general and president Musharraf (1999-2008) to contain the spread of the Taliban. The Obama-government has to deal with an elected but weak coalition-government in Islamabad; its weakness is mainly due to a bewildering variety of crises hitting the country since the civil government took over. After having quit as supreme commander in November 2007, Musharraf was forced to step down as president in August 2008 as well. His successor as Supreme Commander, General Kayani, prefers to cooperate and negotiate with the elected government, keeping the armed forces in its barracks. One of his first orders was to forbid continuous contacts between army personnel and politicians.³⁹

A new president, a new strategy

All this has led to a thorough review of American strategy towards South-Asia by the Obama-government. No longer is military support alone given to Afghanistan and Islamabad individually, as used to be the preferred approach of the Bush-government. Equally important is finding ways and means to economically support and develop both countries.⁴⁰ Therefore, instead of providing mainly national support, a region-wide secure environment must enhance security and further economic growth.⁴¹ Besides, Washington's politicians led by President Obama specifically seek to open a dialogue with the 'moderate' Taliban, as far as they are around.

To some extent, this initiative was based on the remarkable meeting the Saudi-Arabian King had successfully organised in September 2008 (in Mecca) between president Karzai's brother Abdul Qayyum, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Taliban Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil, former spokesman of mullah Omar Mohammad Tayeb Agha and former Afghan ambassador to Islamabad mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef. This remarkable meeting could occur owing to the mediation of Pakistani opposition leader Nawaz Sharif, who has been living in exile in Saudi-Arabia for seven years.

In the new 'AfPak' strategy of the United States, strong military action should go hand in hand with equally strong diplomatic activity and national development.⁴² President Karzai welcomed the new American

approach; being the experienced politician that he is, Karzai also repeatedly stated his willingness to arrive at talks and reconciliation with the Taliban, on the condition that they would accept the authority of his government. Abdullah favours a similar approach. Karzai's conciliatory attitude is in marked contrast with the solid anti-Taliban position taken by his vice-president, Fahim. Concrete measures and procedures to this end, entitled the governments's reconciliation program, are still non-existent. So far, the Taliban response to this 'conciliatory' approach has been to repeat familiar points of view.

This should not be surprising. The Karzai-government is broadly characterised as 'weak' and 'corrupt', and able to survive only because of continuous large-scale international support. Taliban fighters who, for whichever reason, are willing to cease their activities against the government still cannot be adequately accommodated. There are no safe houses or financial support made available for them; no alternative means of living are offered to them (often, Taliban fighters are living on payments by their commanders). The few Taliban commanders who may consider surrendering their weapons, and those who have actually done so, are immediately threatened to be killed. A number of them are. The same morbid principle applies to elders of villages (maliks) who choose to cooperate with government officials.

In the end, success or failure of the new American strategy will be determined by the active support of a huge majority of the Afghan population. The ultimate goal, a peaceful and stabile Afghanistan, is neatly fitting in with the most important wishes of a suspicious population; to be able to live in peace and security. All contenders for the presidency are eagerly promising to further these goals. The one candidate who offers the most inspired, best prospects to arrive at that broadly longed-for future stands the best chance of being elected.

Written by Olivier Immig, Editor Jan van Heugten

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Notes

¹ The elections for the 34 provincial councils are entirely overshadowed by the presidential election. In all, 3196 candidates including 328 women, are competing for 420 seats. 'Taliban kill Afghan vote candidate', in: Dawn, August 18, 2009

² 'Electoral Complaints Commission starts its work for the polls': United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), May 13, 2009. Candidates that have been convicted, especially if on having committed crimes against humanity, are locked out. Three contenders have been denied participation

³ 'Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-establishment of Permanent Government Institutions', UN-Conference Document, Bonn, December 5, 2001

⁴ In the first round. The candidate who manages to acquire at least 50% of all votes wins. One big fear concerning the upcoming election on August 20 is that a second round of voting will be needed. Considering the huge increase of strength of the Taliban-movement and its repeated vow to disturb the voting process, as well as its opposition against 'democracy', that would double the risk of major attempts on candidates' lives. This possible runoff will be held on October 1.

⁵ On this: Ahmed Rashid, Descent into Chaos. How the war against Islamic extremism is being lost in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia. Allen Lane, London 2008, p. 133

⁶ In 2009, approximately 14 million Pashtun people are living in Afghanistan; in Pakistan there are as many as 27 million.

⁷ The present international borderline between Afghanistan and Pakistan was drawn by the Durand-Commission, back in 1893. Ever since, it has never been recognized as such by Afghan kings and governments. Since the border happened to run straight through Pashtun-inhabited areas, serving mainly British colonial interests, this is understandable. Its sheer length (2500 kilometres) as well as its rough features (desert areas and high mountain areas) have always prevented its full closure, enabling guerrilla-fighters to easily straddle the border

⁸ In 1972 there were 893 madrassas in Pakistan; in 2002 their number had reached the 10.000 mark. Of those, over 7.000 belonged to the Deobandi denomination, harbouring many future Taliban students and leaders. See: Charles Allen, God's Terrorists. The Wahhabi Cult and the Hidden Roots of Modern Jihad. Da Capo Press, Cambridge 2006, p. 274. Since 2002 the number of madrassas has continued to increase.

⁹ For a detailed description of all candidates: 'Afghanistan's Presidential Election: Power to the People, or the Powerful?' The International Council on Security and Development (ICOS), London, March 2009

¹⁰ Most recent data on the Afghan population: 'CIA - The World Fact Book', Afghanistan. Latest update; April 29, 2009

¹¹ 'Afghan Presidential Campaigns Begin', in: The Wall Street Journal, June 16, 2009

¹² As of August 18, eleven of the original 41 candidates have withdrawn. 'Taliban kill Afghan vote candidate', in: Dawn, August 18, 2009

¹³ Ahmad Kawush, 'Karzai suffers an election blow', in: Asia Times Online (Atol), August 14, 2009

¹⁴ Derek Henry Flood, 'Chopping it up with Karzai's challenger', in: Asia Times Online, August 17, 2009

¹⁵ Helene Cooper, 'Ex-U.S. Envoy Considers Key Role in Afghan Government', in: The New York Times, May 19, 2009

¹⁶ 'Taliban urged to join Afghan polls', in: Al Jazeera, May 3, 2009

¹⁷ Remarkably, since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 Russia has stayed aloof. The Western attempts to 'export democracy' are considered futile. Rather, Russia should stimulate the 'export of economic development'. Yury Krupnov, 'A Marshall Plan for Afghanistan', in: The Moscow Times, May 14, 2009

¹⁸ Opinion poll by ABC News in February 2009, quoted in in: Anthony H. Cordesman, 'The Afghan-Pakistan Conflict: US Strategic Options in Afghanistan'. Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, March 16, 2009, p.7-8

¹⁹ Carlotta Gall and Ruhullah Khapalwak, 'As Afghan Vote Nears, Taliban Step Up Intimidation Campaign', in: The New York Times, August 13, 2009

²⁰ Derek Henry Flood, 'Chopping it up with Karzai's challenger', in: Asia Times Online, August 17, 2009

²¹ For his political program, see: Ashraf Ghani, 'A Ten-Year Framework for Afghanistan'. Executing the Obama Plan...And Beyond. A Report by The Atlantic Council of the United States, April 2009

²² Tom Coghlan en Jeremy Page, 'Karzai offers rival top Cabinet post in effort to avoid election defeat', in: The Times, August 11, 2009

²³ Joshua Partlow, 'U.S. Officials Looking at Karzai Rival for Key New Post', in: The Washington Post, August 11, 2009

- ²⁴ 'Six killed, 44 wounded in Kabul suicide attack', in: [Afghanistan Sun](#), August 18, 2009
- ²⁵ Fingers stained with ink, the sign of having cast a vote, will be hacked off. Logic Taliban-style: "If anyone is harmed in and around election centres, they will be responsible because we have informed them in advance", says spokesman Qari Yousuf Ahmadi. 'Taliban threaten Afghan voters': [Al Jazeera](#), August 16, 2009
- ²⁶ 'Government: 9 Afghan districts still out of control'; Xinhua Press Agency, as quoted in [Afghanistan Online Press](#), July 29, 2009. According to spokesman General Zaher Azimi over 300.000 Afghan and International soldiers will safeguard the election process
- ²⁷ Raghav Sharma, 'Mapping the Afghan Elections', [Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies \(IPCS, India\)](#), Article No. 2918, 25 July 2009
- ²⁸ Anand Gopal en Yochi J. Dreazen, 'Afghanistan Enlists Tribal Militia Forces', in: [The Wall Street Journal](#), August 11, 2009
- ²⁹ 'Taliban Spokesman Warns Hamid Karzai Must Expect Same Fate As Najibullah', in: [Sada al-Jihad](#), as quoted in: [TerrorismMonitor](#), Vol. VII, Issue 22, July 27, 2009
- ³⁰ Walter Pincus, 'Analysts Expect Long-Term, Costly U.S. Campaign in Afghanistan', in: [The Washington Post](#), August 9, 2009
- ³¹ M.K. Bhadrakumar, 'A fog swirls in the Hindu Kush', in: [Asia Times Online](#), August 17, 2009
- ³² 'Stumbling Into Chaos: Afghanistan on the Brink.' [SenlisAfghanistan](#), London, November 2007
- ³³ Lex Kassenberg, 'Frustraties van een optimist', (Frustrations of an Optimist), in: [Zem Zem](#), (Dutch) Magazine on the Middle East, North Africa and Islam, August 2009, Nr.2, p. 55. Kassenberg has been working in Afghanistan since 2006
- ³⁴ Taimoor Shah and Alan Cowell, 'Bomb Kills 8 Afghans Escorting NATO Convoy', in: [The New York Times](#), July 29, 2009.
- ³⁵ 'New death takes UK Afghan toll to 201', in: [The Times of India](#), August 16, 2009
- ³⁶ Steve Hynd, 'British Conservatives Back Away from Afghanistan'. Published on [Atlantic Council](#), Created July 29, 2009
- ³⁷ Arnaud de Borchgrave, 'Afghanistan Exit Scenario?' [Atlantic Council](#), created July 28, 2009
- ³⁸ 'Karzai's brother reveals vote deal with Taliban', in: [Afghanistan Online Press](#), August 14, 2009
- ³⁹ Syed Saleem Shahzad, 'Musharraf misses his day in court', in: [Asia Times Online](#), July 30, 2009
- ⁴⁰ A point in case is Mr. Holbrooke's recent assurance to Pakistan that the US will 'extend full help and cooperation' to Pakistan to resolve its energy crisis. 'Energy crisis tops Pak-US agenda', in: [The News International](#), August 17, 2009
- ⁴¹ 'An Integrated Approach to Afghanistan and Pakistan'. First public discussion by Mr. Holbrooke and his team of the United States' "AfPak" strategy. [Center for American Progress](#), August 13, 2009
- ⁴² To this end US Minister of Defence Gates has appointed a new commander for Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal. McChrystal is a reputed 'counterinsurgency' expert; he made a name for himself in effectively combating insurgencies in Iraq. Ann Scott Tyson, 'Top U.S. Commander in Afghanistan Is Fired', in: [The Washington Post](#), May 12, 2009

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