

Washington presides over a political and social disaster in Afghanistan

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An event that failed to take place in Kabul this week reveals a good deal about the chaotic state of affairs in Afghanistan, as well as who is pulling the political strings in the country.

The deposed Afghan king, Mohammad Zahir Shah, 87, who has lived in exile in Italy since 1973, was due to make a grand entrance in the capital. The Italian foreign ministry arranged the trip and prepared a security escort. The head of the Afghan interim administration, Hamid Karzai, himself a royalist, was about to fly to Rome to escort the monarch home. A 12-room villa complete with swimming pool had been prepared as his residence in Kabul. The US ambassador in Rome had even held a farewell party.

Then late last week the trip was cancelled. The decision was not made in Kabul nor in Italy but in Washington. President Bush rang Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi questioning security arrangements and warning that the king could face an attempt on his life. Washington insisted that Italian forces, not the Afghan Interior Ministry, provide security in Kabul. Zahir Shah is now scheduled to return next month.

The incident itself is relatively minor but it does expose the character of political relations in Afghanistan. In all matters, great and small, Washington calls the shots, with little reference to its Western allies and none to Karzai and his ministers. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, “the sudden change... irritated and embarrassed” the leaders of the interim government who “said they had no say” but did no more than “grumble privately about outside meddling”.

The real reason for the US decision remains murky but is almost certainly bound up with the unstable character of the faction-riven Karzai administration, which was installed last December at a UN-convened conference held in Bonn. At that meeting the US and other major powers, using a mixture of bribes and threats, compelled the rival Afghan factions and groups to accept UN Security Council proposals. Karzai’s main qualification for the job of interim leader was his longtime connections with Washington.

Several American newspapers, quoting anonymous “Western diplomats,” have stated that the threats to Zahir Shah’s life came from the Northern Alliance, which is based on northern ethnic groups—Uzbeks, Tajiks and Hazaras. The Northern Alliance, on which the US relied heavily to topple the Taliban regime, holds the key ministries of defence, interior and foreign affairs. At Bonn, the Northern Alliance leaders opposed attempts by the royalist faction to carve out a major role for the king, whose traditional base is the tribal leadership of the country’s southern Pashtun majority.

Whether, as “an Italian foreign ministry official” claimed, the Northern Alliance had plans to shoot down Zahir Shah’s aircraft seems doubtful. The king’s private secretary, Zalmai Rassoul, told the *Los Angeles Times* that he was satisfied with the security arrangements worked out with Interior Minister Younis Qanooni, a leading Northern Alliance member. But the fears over the monarch’s security indicate that there is concern over the public reaction in Afghanistan to his return.

While the international media regularly bill the king as a stabilising factor and symbol of unity, he is regarded with suspicion and distrust not only among northern ethnic groups but among the Pashtun tribes as well. There are signs that Zahir Shah and his faction are preparing to carve out a larger role for the ex-monarch than the small ceremonial one allotted at Bonn. Despite his advanced age, he has plans to visit areas of his former domain where he is not well-liked, including the cities of Mazar-e-Sharif in the north and Herat in the west.

Zahir Shah’s only formal function is to preside over the *loya jirga* or grand tribal council, which, according to the UN proscribed schedule, is due to convene in June to select a head of state and a transitional government for the following two years. It will also establish mechanisms to write a new constitution to underpin the courts and state bureaucracy and to prepare for elections in 2004.

The *loya jirga* itself is a cynical piece of political theatre designed to give a democratic gloss to a regime that has no power to make even relatively minor decisions. It is strongly reminiscent of the days of the Raj, when the British rulers permitted hand-picked assemblies of flunkies to debate the issues of the day—as long as everyone understood the real centre of power was London.

The *loya jirga* is being convened by the Loya Jirga Commission, whose 21 members—lawyers, doctors and professors—were all selected by the UN. The commission will lay down the procedures for selecting the 800 to 1,000 representatives of tribes, clans and other communities. It is clear in advance, however, that there will be no open elections to the body.

An article in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* explained that “each group will make selections through indirect elections in meetings held according its own cultural practices”. Even this process will be limited as the Commission will select a significant number of technocrats, businessmen and other “representatives” without any consultation. Moreover, the body will have the power to reject any candidate that it believes “does not reflect the will of the people.”

The UN and major powers are carefully scripting the *loya jirga* as the assembly has the potential to bring to the surface all of the sharp tensions and contradictions that underlie the fragile Afghan administration. Karzai sits atop a cabinet drawn from the representatives of an assortment of regional warlords, ethnic-based militia and tribal leaders. Having no army of his own, he is compelled to balance between competing groups, using his connections in Washington and the promise of aid money to form alliances and buy favours.

Inside Kabul, the Afghan regime is heavily dependent on the 4,800 troops of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to maintain some semblance of control. Karzai and senior UN officials have called for the expansion of the ISAF to other cities but, after a protracted debate in the Bush administration, the proposal was vetoed by Washington. Any extension of the ISAF would end the current monopoly of military power that Washington enjoys throughout the country and cut across its plans for a largely US-trained Afghan national army as the means for exerting long

term political influence.

The severe truncation of the functions allocated to the ISAF by Washington goes a long way to explaining why there is a distinct lack of interest in the ongoing operation. Britain has declined to continue to lead the force and Germany has refused entreaties to take over the leadership. Turkey only reluctantly agreed to take on the task after the US offered a substantial bribe to offset the costs. None of America's rivals want a job that does not offer the prospect of expanding their influence in the country.

Outside the capital, Karzai's writ ends abruptly. All the other major cities are dominated by warlords and militia commanders, who, while nominally acknowledging their fealty to Kabul, dictate affairs in their respective domains. In Mazar-e-Sharif, Uzbek warlord and Deputy Defence Minister Abdul Rashid Dostum holds sway. Earlier in the year his troops engaged in bloody clashes with Tajik militia loyal to Defence Minister Mohammad Fahim. Any taxes and levies raised in the area go to pay Dostum's troops. As Abdul Jaber Qazi Zoda, provincial finance director, bluntly put the matter: "General Dostum is the boss."

From Herat, Ismail Khan exerts his control over five of the country's provinces. His son holds a post in the Karzai administration—as a representative of Khan in Kabul rather than the reverse. Khan's troops control the border with Iran and the lucrative levies on trucks entering Afghanistan flow into his coffers not those of the central government. Washington has accused Khan of undermining Karzai by developing his own close relations with neighbouring Iran but, nevertheless maintain ties with him.

In the Pashtun areas of southern and eastern Afghanistan, who controls what is far more confused. A patchwork of rival tribal-based militia vie for the patronage of the US military in order to stake their own domains. In Jalalabad, three militia commanders compete for influence, in Kandahar at least two, and in more remote areas even more. These are impoverished, self-contained fiefdoms with only tenuous economic and political links to the Karzai government.

The only political lever available to Karzai is the influence he exerts, courtesy of the major powers, over the dispensing of aid money. At present, the UN is consciously attempting to use the \$4.5 billion of assistance pledged at a meeting of donors in Tokyo in January to bolster the central government and undermine the power of local warlords.

A recent *New York Times* article entitled "Charm and the West keep Karzai in power, for now" outlined the UN's strategy. "In an interview, Mr Fisher [deputy director of the UN special mission to Afghanistan] said it was the United Nations' priority to try to use the aid money as a tool to help strengthen Mr Karzai's government. By channelling money if possible through Kabul, Mr Fisher said, the organisation hopes to increase the dependency of local areas on the central government, further the unification of the country."

"We are trying to create an impression of governance," Fisher earnestly explained. "Symbolism is important."

The obvious problem for Karzai is that "impressions" and "symbolism" may offer a short-term expedient but will do nothing to satisfy the demands of local powerbrokers or, more significantly, lessen the social tensions being fuelled by the appalling conditions facing the majority of the country's population.

Very little of the limited aid money promised in Tokyo has found its way into Afghanistan. The UN has paid the salaries of government workers for the last two months—in Kabul not other areas. It has provided a little money to repair government offices and provide some office equipment. The organisation has also spent \$24 million organising the return to school of around 1.7 million Afghan children on March 23.

Karzai's top economic adviser, Ashraf Ghani, former World Bank official and head of the Afghan Assistance Co-ordination Authority, attempted to lay down the law at a meeting of donors and UN agencies on

February 28. The Afghan authorities, he insisted, would set the priorities on the spending of the money. Nothing changed, however, and money is still in short supply in Kabul.

Journalist Ahmed Rashid recently commented in the *Wall Street Journal*: "So far none of the Tokyo money has arrived, and the government is living hand-to-mouth to meet its running costs. The government has received grants of as much as \$US10 million each from India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—which Karzai carried home in suitcases because there is no banking system in Kabul. The government also has \$100 million in cash and \$120 million in gold, unfrozen by the US in January (the Clinton administration froze the assets to punish the Taliban regime).

"Like much else in Afghanistan, the monetary system is a shambles. Three currencies issued by various warlord factions are creating havoc and fuelling inflation. Until a new currency is established, the IMF has recommended the temporary use of dollars for project aid and government salaries. Karzai has suggested the euro, but no decision has been made."

Describing the situation in Kabul, he continued: "On city streets, thousands of unemployed people crowd ministries and United Nations' offices looking for jobs. Beggars have staked out foreigners' houses and Afghans holding university degrees work as drivers for foreign agencies. Most cities are utterly destroyed, with no running water, sewerage or central heating, and only intermittent electricity."

At present, there is considerable media coverage of this week's earthquake in Nahrin, in a remote area of the Hindu Kush mountains, north of Kabul. As many as 1,200 people are believed to have died, many others have been injured and up to 10,000 people have been left homeless. Without in any way minimising the suffering caused by the quake, it is worth noting that the social and economic collapse in Afghanistan is preparing a tragedy of far greater proportions that goes largely unreported.

Just to cite a few indications:

Afghanistan is in the fourth year of a drought that has severely affected agriculture already devastated by two decades of war. A recent *Associated Press* article reporting from Arghanbad in southern Afghanistan described a dustbowl with dry wells, where fruit trees and vines had been uprooted to conserve water for the remainder, and many farms were abandoned.

A *Reuters* report cited a joint UNICEF/NGO assessment in the remote Badghis Province which found that one in eight children under the age of five were suffering from severe malnutrition. "In any given year in the past decade some 250,000 children under five have died. The current rate of severe malnutrition is now six times higher than then." UNICEF spokeswoman Wivina Belmonte stated.

This week the World Food Program's director Catherine Bertini announced that the agency had received only 5 percent of the \$285 million in emergency aid required to feed people in Afghanistan for the rest of the year. The program estimates that nine million Afghans will need food aid up to July with more than five million requiring assistance until the end of the year.

The lack of food has led directly to the emergence of diseases caused by vitamin deficiencies. The World Health Organisation reported in mid-March that 40 people had died in a remote area in western Afghanistan from scurvy—a disease caused by the lack of vitamin C. The team also found cases of night blindness caused by the lack of vitamin A.

Such are the desperate straits that families are in that they resort to selling their children—to ensure they will be looked after and the remaining family members will survive. A *New York Times* article entitled "Children as Barter in a Famished Land" described the situation in the village of Kangoori where parents having sold all their property took their children to a market in the nearby town to sell them for bags of wheat.

Neither Karzai nor his masters in Washington intend to provide resources on the scale that is required to deal with this social catastrophe which will, in turn, only heighten the political tensions in the country.



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