

COMMENT: The Key to Afghan Democracy

Author: [Mohammed Qabool](#)

Civic-minded, educated Afghans could play a vital role in the reconstruction of the country and the establishment of a democratic government.

For Afghans, only the formation of a stable and democratic government, capable of putting an end to the misery of the people there, can justify the US air strikes. Otherwise, these efforts will be no more than a new phase in the vicious cycle of war and violence, and Afghans will remain as now caught in the trap of fundamentalism and terrorism.

Yet while all parties concerned talk about the need for a broad-based government, no one has been able to put forward a concrete definition of what that would mean. In fact, various foreign powers only add to the confusion by promoting their own interpretations. The only common feature is the intention of outsiders to impose their own favoured personalities and groups as the representatives of the Afghan population.

Pakistan, for examples, supports a "moderate Taleban" option drawn from the Pashtun population, and opposes any major role for the Tajik- and Uzbek-dominated Northern Alliance. India, Russia and Iran have all rejected any role for any wing of the Taleban. They believe a Northern Alliance government, led by ousted President Buhanuddin Rabbani, is capable of ruling the country.

Such positions once again subject the future rule of Afghanistan to the whims of the regional powers. This could deprive Afghans of the main opportunity that could emerge from the collapse of the Taleban - the creation of a truly representative government.

The core of the problem is the lack of an alternative national leadership. Mohammed Zahir Shah, the former king, is the only personality able to play a central role in reviving state structures. But he commands no organised political or military force, so in circumstances where armed organisations have the upper hand, his role could only be symbolic and temporary.

Indeed, the conceptual flaw in discussions about a post-Taleban settlement is the assumption that groups that have long made war will now make peace. War is their way of life. They are products of fighting. They understand that they will have no role in a peaceful environment.

Indeed, Afghans are very anxious about the record of atrocities these militia groups committed following the collapse of the communist regime in 1992. As one Afghan businessman said, referring to the period of mujahedin rule before 1996, "People are praying that God saves them from the Taleban, but not at the cost of bringing back the others."

Hostility dominates the warlords' personal relationships. Alliances are formed only when groups come under pressure from a common enemy, and then may be easily broken.

Surviving with the support of competing regional powers, they stand accused of compromising Afghan national and even their own ethnic interests. Now that a military victory over Taleban and the al-Qaeda terrorist network is at the top of the US agenda, such armed groups are only being strengthened.

Yet it is very possible that as soon as the Taleban menace and US military pressure recede, these groups - including members of the Northern Alliance - could turn on each other.

In the midst of all of this, intellectuals, educated Afghans, business people and other personalities find themselves increasingly ignored. With war on the agenda, they are not seen as having a practical role. Yet such an approach is short-sighted. These people can play a vital part in the reconstruction of the country, and would be the driving force in any effort to move towards peace and democracy.

And what of Afghanistan's "silent majority". Those who have for years endured the burden of hardship and misfortune patiently. No one ever asked them what they thought or wished. Many doubt talk of democracy in a land riven by decades of war. But in fact it is the habit of ignoring people's will that has culminated in the Afghan catastrophe.

No doubt, the armed groups must be taken into account, particularly in the current military campaign. But it is vital to keep this role to a minimum and to help them to transform themselves from military formations into political parties.

This requires the political determination and financial generosity of the international community to help those Afghan personalities and forces committed to democracy. As a leading force, they can mobilise the population at large to demand and support an elected government.

As two decades of conflict have demonstrated, no government created outside the country has ever been welcomed by Afghans. An elected administration is the only option that can ensure friendly relationships with all Afghanistan's neighbours and reflect the country's ethnic diversity.

Armed groups cannot be trusted. The warlords not only violate agreements with each other easily, they have never remained loyal to their own creators for long. It is not improbable that, once assured of the defeat of the Taleban, they will confront US forces in the name of fighting an army of occupation, or defending Islam.

To escape their past, they need a new cause to fight for.

Mohammed Qabool was publisher and editor of the Kabul newspaper Nawa-e-Sobh (Voice of Morning) in 1990-91, when it was closed by the then president Mohammed Najibullah.

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