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The State of the Afghan State

This paper is a part of the AAN Discussion Paper Series. The series aims to provide a platform for a wide variety of views and contributions on developments in and around Afghanistan, with an aim to further inform and encourage debate.

AAN member and Country Director of the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan gives his view on where Afghanistan stands, what went wrong and what can be done.

Three times during the last century, Afghan governments have made sudden and extensive attempts to strengthen the authority of the state by introducing ambitious and wide-ranging national reform programmes. The motivation, politics and ideologies behind these undertakings were diverse, but they have a couple of factors in common. Firstly, that they tried to convert Afghanistan into a more modern country within a relatively short time period and, secondly, that the reform programmes caused armed rebellions among the rural population. The first uprising was in 1928, when a popular rebellion against King Amanullah's reform programme caused his abdication. The second was the 1978-1992 war against the communist government and the Soviet occupation which ended with the collapse of the Najib regime and the mujahedin take-over of Kabul. The third is the present insurgency against an Afghan government supported by an international coalition led by the US.

The motivation, politics and loyalties behind these three uprisings are not identical but they have in common that the reforms were seen as foreign intrusions threatening Islamic values, and that they were led mainly by groups and individuals claiming religious and, to some extent, traditional national credentials. The governments pushing for reforms, and their allies, were branded as traitors and un-believers with the ultimate goal to destroy the religion of Islam and the independence of Afghanistan. It was only during the reign of King Zaher Shah, and then especially in the 1950s and 60s, that the government succeeded with reforms without causing strong reactions, most probably because it was done in a limited and careful manner, mainly focusing on urban centers and at a slow pace.

The most fundamental problem in the present conflict lies with the Afghan government and its international allies, the lack of state services and justice in rural areas, corruption, absence of local governance structures at the expense of

informal often corrupt networks, high rates of unemployment, the appalling lack of coordination and, to quite an extent, the dismal performance of the international assistance community. In short, it is the weaknesses of the government and the foreign assistance which together with the performance of the international military forces function as the main strength of the insurgency.

The great majority of experts and observers as well as the politicians and the military seem to agree that there is no military solution to the situation. After the cancelled second election round, diplomatic activity and the debate has more and more focused on linking the future engagement of the US administration and its allies to the performance of the Afghan state, and for the first time the fateful words “exit strategy” and “not an open-ended commitment” are uttered by the US President himself. Words which remind us of what the Taliban leader said a few years ago about Westerners having their watches while the Taliban has the time.

The demands on President Karzai are suddenly becoming much tougher but as he knows very well that he is the only Afghan card that the US and other international actors can play, he is using the fact that Afghanistan is recognized as a sovereign country to withstand the pressure while, at the same time, admitting that there is need for change and that he will not hesitate to implement it. However, based on his performance during eight years as president, there are clearly some serious doubts whether he will be able or even willing to deliver. In short, confusion reigns and there is a remarkable lack of ideas on how to turn the tide or even suggestions how to set up a credible process in order to formulate and achieve a broad agreement on such ideas and plans to make them a reality.

It is true that only a minority of the insurgency movement is motivated by a radical Islamist ideology and that the majority of its fighting forces has joined due to more pragmatic and opportunistic reasons. It's furthermore true that only a small minority of the Afghan people would like to see the Taliban back in power. However, it is also true that in spite of that, and in spite of how much development assistance is

increased or how many more foreign troops and civilian experts are sent to Afghanistan, if the performance of the state is not radically changed and improved, the insurgency is most likely to continue to grow. It might temporarily be forced to make tactical retreats in areas where it comes under heavy military pressure but it will nevertheless continue to grow in strength and numbers over time. Similarly, any efforts to negotiate with the insurgency or reconcile with parts of it are doomed to fail and will only serve as steps towards a complete defeat without a relatively well functioning state.

INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE AND THE STATE

State building in Afghanistan has historically been characterised by highly centralised but weak government institutions which have used an inflexible top-down approach in their relation to society and especially towards the population in the rural areas. The present government is no exception, although there are a few ministries that are making attempts to relate to local communities in a constructive manner. This institutional weakness is caused by several factors: the scarcity of qualified and competent human resources, the dominant patron-client tradition which has negative effects both on recruitment of civil servants and the manner in which political agreements are made, the fact that warlords and local commanders continue to exert considerable power and are part and parcel of the ruling elite, the absence of authoritative and independent mechanisms for financial control and accountability, which together with the significant illicit economy is one of the main causes contributing to the growth of corruption, and the feeble and chaotic conditions which characterise local governance, to mention a few of the most important.

The international development assistance to Afghanistan which exploded in the years after 2001 has also not been very useful, to put it mildly, in building Afghan state institutions. It has rather been characterised by an absence of coherence and coordination and has, in spite of several international conferences and

agreements, shown an astonishing inability to congregate around a common needs-based analysis and strategy with clearly defined tasks and benchmarks for the different donors. Several reports have illustrated that donors tend to stick to what they perceive as their own mandates, policies and priorities, irrespective of whether these correspond to any actual needs as defined in a national context. The results are, among others, an imbalance between regions and provinces with regard to development assistance; an overpopulation of government ministries and institutions with essentially unproductive but highly paid international advisors and consultants who most often know nothing or very little about the country, its people, culture and history, and whose main function has been to further alienate the state from the citizens; the neglect of important sectors like agriculture, higher education and local governance, and the use of procurement practices which have facilitated corruption and mismanagement of development assistance funds.

Already at the beginning of the state building process, immediately after the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001, the international community made two fundamental mistakes which would have far-reaching and damaging consequences in the following years. The first being its obsession to impose an essentially western state model and political organisation; completely ignoring the fact that it took the nation-states in Europe centuries of economic, social and political development to reach a democratic system with functioning institutions, and that Afghanistan is a predominantly traditional society where a more unpretentious version would have been more appropriate and sustainable.

For instance, instead of general elections which so far, with the latest exercise in fresh memory, have mainly served to undermine the legitimacy of the state, the model which was used in 2002 for the Emergency Loya Jirga, where traditional district meetings appointed representatives to regional gatherings which then elected the participants to the Loya Jirga, would most probably have been more suitable. It was a semi-democratic process which, at the time, resulted in the most representative national gathering ever in Afghan history. It was not

perfect and block voting, undue pressures from local strongmen and warlords, and other attempts to botch the process occurred, but compared to the recent general elections it was much more transparent, easier to control and, not the least, much cheaper and thus a system which Afghanistan actually can afford.

The second fundamental mistake was that warlords, commanders and other local strongmen were brought back in by the US military to be the boots on the ground in the war against the Taliban and Al Qaida. They were given huge amounts of dollars without any accountability whatsoever, and then allowed to continue in principal positions, often supported by the international military forces, both in the central government and in the regions. Thus, the basis was laid for a weak constitutional, political and administrative system - especially with regard to local governance, judiciary and law enforcement. The result became a rapid growth of the illegal drug industry, violations of the rights of individuals and population groups, the growth of corruption and inefficiency affecting state institutions, which in turn facilitated the resurgence of the Taliban and other insurgency groups.

In short, when the blame game now suddenly becomes politically crucial for the leaders in the West, the finger should not only be pointed at President Karzai but also at themselves.

WHAT KIND OF STATE

Any serious attempt to radically improve the performance of the Afghan state would require forceful action to rectify the damaging practices and systems which, in their turn, are the result of mistakes, weak leadership, detrimental traditional customs for exercising power, and a faulty international assistance effort. Needless to say, the most important prerequisite is a strong will and commitment to achieve political change; for the Afghans to stop treating politics as a game for personal gains, influence and profits, to limit the dominant patron-client system and focus on building credible institutions; for the international actors to stop their ethnocentric approach and start behaving in a responsible and constructive manner; and

for both to put the interest of Afghanistan and its people in the first place.

Some actions are evident, like the necessity for the international community to make long-term commitments based on an in-depth, agreed and honest analysis and strategy which clearly spells out the needs and priorities of the country and where individual donors are assigned specific tasks. Another is to build the capacity of the state administration where, to some extent, there are useful examples to follow and learn from, like the performances of the Ministries for Public Health, Education and Rural Rehabilitation and Development. And, in this context, to finally establish a functioning and independent Civil Service Commission with, among others, the task to regulate and scrutinise the recruitment of civil servants.

Other measures are more difficult but not less needed. To restrain the informal and most often damaging influence of warlords, commanders and local strongmen, there is above all a need for the international military forces to stop supporting them and political courage and will among Afghan officials and elected politicians to stop making deals and instead put their trust in the build-up of formal institutions. To bring corruption under control, there is a need not only for another anti-corruption body but for a truly independent commission which, in the absence of a strong judiciary and law enforcement, must be given the authority to prosecute. To strengthen the judiciary, one way forward, as it has been suggested before, could be to recognise the importance of the so called traditional courts, which anyway are used by a majority of Afghans to solve civil law cases.

Last but not least, the solution to local governance is not primarily to extend central control over provinces and districts but rather to limit the traditional top-down approach and empower local communities to get a say in their own affairs, to increase transparency and give them the authority to monitor and control

government bodies at district and provincial levels. That this can be done has already been shown in the process leading up to the Emergency Loya Jirga, in the National Solidarity Programme where elected Community Development Councils are functioning in many areas, and in the Community Education Councils, Health Committees and similar community bodies which have been established, mainly with the assistance of NGOs.

CONCLUSION

One should not try to predict the future in Afghanistan for the simple reason that one most probably will be wrong. However, it is still possible to assert that the most crucial issue deciding the future of Afghanistan is the performance of the state. If the present Afghan government and its international allies prove unable or unwilling to radically and quickly change the destructive political trends which have become increasingly dominant during the last 3-4 years, with the recent election just one step further down the stairs, it is a plausible presumption that there is a window of 5-6 years, or even less, before the international forces will withdraw and that the Afghan army and security forces will be standing alone against the insurgency, with a result which with certainty will be overwhelming – not only for Afghanistan but for the whole region. On the other hand, should a political change occur where the state building process is taken seriously, the problems of regional and local governance sorted out, where local communities are given a voice and influence, firm measures against corruption and inefficiency taken, the power of warlords and commanders curbed, and the international assistance made more efficient, coordinated, competent and coherent, there is a possibility that the dark skies over Afghanistan will start to drift off within some 10-20 years.

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Anders Fänge started work on Afghanistan in 1982. First as a journalist, travelling widely in Afghanistan with the mujahedin, and later as the Country Director of the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan – a post to which he has returned several times over the years; most recently in 2007. Between 2001 and 2003 he headed the Field Coordination Department of UNAMA's political pillar.

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