

ARGO INTERVIEWS

AFGHANISTAN: CORRUPTION IS THE MOTHER OF ALL PROBLEMS

- Interview with Daoud Sultanzoy -

Elected to the Wolesi Jirga from Ghazni Province, Daoud Sultanzoy is one of the emerging personalities in the country's political arena. Pashtun ethnic (as President Karzai and many Afghan leaders), he belongs to the Malakhil tribe that is part of the Ghilzai confederation. Civil pilot, after the Soviet invasion he defected on a plane to Germany. He participated to the resistance against the occupants, which he left after being wounded. He then worked for foreign air companies. After the fall of the Taliban regime he returned to Afghanistan and began engaging in the political life. He's Chairman of the Wolesi Jirga Committee for economy, rural development, agriculture and NGOs. He's currently working towards establishing a party that would unify progressive and democratic components.

Q. *What is your assessment of the current security situation in Afghanistan? Is it worsening or there are indications that it is improving?*

A. The security situation has been deteriorating, especially in the past two years, with a steady decline. I think the military operations coupled with non military measures and also the coordination with Pakistan should make a difference. Pakistan is becoming aware of the fact that any instability in Afghanistan affects them directly. They can play a role and reduce the cross border operations from the other side. If that doesn't happen I don't see any immediate change in the situation.

I think we on our part have weaknesses we have to deal with seriously. It is these weaknesses that are creating a vacuum in which the insurgency is finding a space to manoeuvre. It has become the oxygen they breathe. These weaknesses are mostly of non military nature which encompasses an array of factors.

Most of the time when I see the security situation, I think it's not the strength of the Taliban, it's the inability of the Afghan Government, and our own shortcomings to reach out to remote areas, and provide the basic services a Government should provide. This is creating problems for security. Corruption is one of the examples. Bad governance is another example. A very anaemic and very incoherent and uncoordinated reconstruction. That is adding to security problems. Inability to understand the people, their sensitivities and the tradition adds to the complication of our coalition to be effective in winning the hearts and minds of people. These are Taliban's strength, none of which is of their own making.

Q. *Do you believe that the insurgency is Afghan-directed or is directed by “other hands”?*

A. Of course, as you know, insurgency has different layers of leadership. The command and control is not inside Afghanistan. Their brains are outside Afghanistan. At the field level naturally they have some ability to manoeuvre because they operate in small groups, and they resort to guerrilla tactics. They have these abilities. But the overall masterminding of the operations is taking shape outside the country, perhaps in more than one country. It's spread out.

When I look at this, the Taliban are very effective instruments in the hands of anyone else who wants to see the efforts of NATO and the coalition fail in Afghanistan. This is aimed at denying us all the success we need to turn things around for the people of Afghanistan and let them live a dignified life as a nation in this part of the world. It is our right and we deserve it. Naturally, looking at the extension, those countries that will benefit from the destabilization of Afghanistan, you see, they are quite a few.

Q. *What is the aim of the Taliban and of those who control them? Is their aim to take over Afghanistan or to destabilize it?*

A. Their most sophisticated leadership knows the complex nature of the war and I am sure they know they can be a long-term thorn on the side of NATO and the coalition. But the “rank and file” Taliban at local and middle levels think they can defeat the USA and NATO. So it is a very interesting mix. They are not fighting half-heartedly, they're serious. And we have to find serious ways to deal with that. Not just military solutions alone.

Serious steps should be taken to make sure that Iran and Pakistan understand that a stable Afghanistan is in the interest of the world and the world is serious about helping to create a viable Afghanistan. If this message is sent to Pakistan and Iran, then Afghanistan will not be a second-class country in the region and it will be on the same level plain field with them. Then they will understand that they have to change their calculations and to think of better alternatives instead of destabilizing Afghanistan.

I think the local Taliban probably do not think that way. They are not that sophisticated. They just think, “This is a jihad” and that “Foreigners have come, we will fight them”. This is the calculus some players bank on to instigate this insurgency.

Q. *There are some hopes of a split within the ranks of the Taliban, with the less radical elements ready to start negotiations. Do you believe that the dialogue with the most flexible elements could be successful?*

A. I think we made a very big mistake from the beginning. We should have engaged those less radical, middle-of-the-road Taliban in the building process. We made that mistake.

And now the present Government and the President are looking for dialogue with these elements. But also the Taliban are thinking “Maybe he is doing these things for his re-election Maybe this rapprochement is not for peace in Afghanistan but for his own re-election”. Otherwise, why did those things not start long ago, so that we could have had a better chance in reconstruction, and to bring stability to remote parts of the country? So that the poor people of Afghanistan could have benefited from the historical opportunity of the world's willingness in helping Afghanistan.

We should have been proactive seven years ago, six years ago, five years ago, even two years ago. We lost a lot of time, and this loss of time is measured in misery by the people of Afghanistan. And the President of Afghanistan is personally responsible for this. When he talks to these less radical elements the question raised is “Why weren't these things happening three years ago? Why now?” Naturally, this move is suspicious now. So close to elections!

I think the Taliban will not be fooled by cosmetic measures. I wish this was a sincere thing so long ago.

Q. *Is the leadership of the insurgency divided or united around the personality of Mullah Omar?*

A. Right now as we speak, there may be some regional leader, in some spots of the country that may have some sorts of autonomy. But so far nobody else has risen and challenged the authority of Mullah Omar, as a spiritual leader so to speak. At least symbolically he remains the leader. Some groups may be operating with more autonomy, but they haven't challenged his symbolical leadership yet.

Q. *So the historical groups within the Taliban are convinced to support the positions of Mullah Omar?*

A. We notice this trend. Some of these people have come up and tried to resurrect themselves as the new leaders. But it hasn't been sustainable and it has not stuck. It shows that they only come from some region and they are famous in that specific region. Mullah Omar became very famous because at that time the Taliban regime was in charge of the whole country. But right now no one can rise into the national level in the short term. Mullah Omar is their only national leader, unless there is a major ideological split among them.

Q. *What are the effects of the intervention of the international community in Afghanistan?*

A. The intervention of the international community in Afghanistan has many dimensions. One of these dimensions is military and one is reconstruction. Others are economic development, but also socio-political developments. But the most important aspects as far as we are concerned are that they have put more emphasis on some at the expense of other sides of development. This lack of attention is very evident in the political arena in particular.

The military side of the situation is complicated. Most of the burden of the military operations is carried by the United States. And the U.S. is the largest player in the military operations and in the international security forces based especially in Kabul and in big cities. The disproportionate participation in terms of the role is creating disproportionate coordination problems, because not every country has the same weight in this partnership. Those countries that were there symbolically have one weight and the US, as a major participant, has a different weight. It is only natural. This is something NATO and ISAF forces have to deal with themselves. It's their problem they have to solve. But those internal problems do have an effect in the security situation in Afghanistan. The fatigue-factor, for example. The United States can get tired of all that weight they carry. That could create a situation in which the US taxpayer can say, “Well, we will not carry that weight any more”. That could create a crisis within NATO members. That is a possibility in the long run.

The other aspect of the military situation is that NATO has not dealt with Pakistan seriously. Pakistan has created big problems for NATO operations in Afghanistan and for Enduring Freedom. We are just going and trying to hit the mosquitoes, instead of going into the swamp and dealing with the swamp. That's the other side of the problem.

When we are talking about the reconstruction efforts of NATO and ISAF and donor countries in Afghanistan, we talk about the PRTs. It is a semi-military operation, but it is dealt with in a very complicated fashion that creates at least less than desired coordination, less than desired cohesion in terms of reconstruction.

The other aspect that has created problems for Afghanistan is that the donor countries and the international organizations that act as donors are also involved in some corruption and waste. If not corruption, a lot of waste, a lot of duplication, a lot of lack of coordination, a lot of lack of cohesion. So all these things that I mentioned one by one contribute to lack of effectiveness of all the funds that are coming to Afghanistan, all the efforts that are coming to Afghanistan.

I hope the past seven years have taught us all, several lessons. The first lesson, on the Afghan side, is that the international community should not “put all its eggs in one basket”, in Mr. Karzai's basket. The people of Afghanistan and the international community have tested him and his team for seven years. It's time to move on to a new leadership team.

The second thing we should have learnt by the past seven years is that we need to hold the Afghan Government accountable. There is very little accountability. With that accountability we have also to mention a weak leadership. Most of the ministers of the Government, including the President, had no previous managerial experience. They are learning on the job. And it has taken six-seven years and they have still to learn. And the international community cannot be babysitting us forever. The Afghanistan leadership is acting as a spoiled child. The more they want the more you give them and the worse they become. There has to be some sense of responsibility, some sense of accountability. This has not been seriously done in the past.

So the international community can learn from those things. In terms of the donors' usage of funds, because of the lack of capacity of the Government, the donors have to find other ways to use these funds effectively in Afghanistan. Because just using it through their own organizations alone adds so much cost to the projects. They too, need to clean up their act.

Q. *What should the priorities be for the next President of Afghanistan?*

A. I think the first thing that has to be dealt with in the future is corruption. Any new President, any new administration that is serious in changing things in Afghanistan has to start with corruption. Corruption is the mother of all problems in Afghanistan. I think corruption leads to poor governance, corruption leads to a weak response to drug problems in Afghanistan, corruption leads to ineffective reconstruction, ineffective services to the people of the country, and ineffective security, because of people's dissatisfaction. When you actually deal with corruption you have to be able to deal with some other issues simultaneously. But corruption has to be at the top. Then you can come and talk about good governance, about the rule of law, about justice, about planning and vision and a team to implement all these things. These things go hand in hand.

Hamid Karzai by nature is not a strong leader. His personality shows he is not swift in dealing with problems. People of his family are involved in corruption, and also people from his team and some of his allies. This raises the question of his leadership and of his ability to tackle that problem.

The people are looking for a change. The international community should show its sincerity. This could be a test case to show that the Afghan people would be able to choose a new leader and substitute the old one. That could give confidence to the Afghans. Pakistan and Iran would also understand that they couldn't play their games. I hope the international money will not be used to eschew the elections, otherwise if the election is perceived to have been rigged, the people of Afghanistan will be within their right to assume that the international community imposed a failed leadership on Afghanistan. This will not be a good credential for democracy in Afghanistan. People will lose faith and then really join the insurgency willingly. Also for the Taliban it could be an opportunity to participate in the elections.

Q. *How are you going to bring to justice the warlords who are responsible for crimes (kidnapping, etc.)?*

A. One reason that they have not been brought to justice is that the Government is so corrupt. The Government is on the receiving end of some of the profits some of the warlords are making from stealing, from smuggling, from war crimes, from arms dealings. Some of them are in the Government itself, within the private sector, within the executive branch. They are a team, and they play together.

Naturally, you cannot talk of justice and good governance and fighting corruption if you don't deal with these things. You have to deal with these things. Justice is the only way you can fight corruption, or war crimes or any other negative aspects of life in our country.

Q. *If we consider the reconstruction, in which sectors have the efforts been successful?*

A. We had some successes in terms of building roads in some areas, although that has suffered from poor quality, because the bidding process has been set so that the company that is constructing the roads is the second or third tier, while the company that gets the money is the first. So there is a lot of money being filtered. If the project was, let's say, fifty million dollars, the guy who builds the road is receiving five millions dollars. Naturally, the quality of the road suffers.

The second problem is that, among the roads that have been built, so far only Kabul-Kandahar road has been in service. Kabul-Jalalabad road is still not functioning.

Seven years is a long time, even if you take away the days of bad weather or the days of the elaboration of the project. The Afghan government should have been able to build a lot more. In six or seven years we have not done very well.

One of the biggest success stories in seven years that was felt by the people, and is not accomplished by the Government but by the private initiatives, is the media. We have a proliferation of television stations and newspapers. But we have reached a point where we have to be very careful. Because some other countries have been pouring a lot of money in that sector to buy the media to play a deeper role in the instability of the country. That could become very

dangerous in the future and we have to be careful. We must have a policy; a strategy on how much is enough.

The private sector was beginning to become very interested in the Afghan economy. But in the past three years they have been turning back from Afghanistan for security reasons. The trends were very good in the beginning, but because of bad governance and poor security people are going away from Afghanistan.

But I'm an optimist and I think the good days of Afghanistan are ahead of it. We should look at these seven years as a learning process and dump it, learn from it and move forward. If we repeat, then we are condemned.

Q. *There were also some successes in the health and education sectors...*

A. In the health sector some things have been done and some things have been publicized in a way that shows more than the truth. For example, the Minister of Health claims that 85-90% of Afghanistan has a basic health coverage. That number is completely untrue. It is a big lie.

The education sector is claiming some success. It may be of more quantitative nature if any. For instance we have teachers who were ninth graders or tenth graders teaching to the 12th grade. The number of students in classrooms, etc. I think we need more quality in our education system than quantity.

Q. *Karzai is speaking about involving religious groups in education and media.*

A. In the previous months the President staged these groups. The President is encouraging these groups to come and speak out so he can put pressure on the international community. He is using these old tactics. It seems he is borrowing some tactics from the nineteenth century kings of Afghanistan who were playing with the British this way. On one hand they were brought to deal with the British, on the other hand they were instigating the population against the British. This is a very dangerous game. This is good neither for Afghanistan nor for our allies.

We should be very straightforward with our friends, for they help us. And we have to be very straightforward with the people of Afghanistan. They have been misled for too long. We have to tell them why our allies are in Afghanistan. And we have to tell our allies what do we need in Afghanistan. We cannot play this double edge game of Russian roulette. It is very dangerous. That's what he is doing right now.