

## **ARGO'S INTERVIEWS**

### **AFGHANISTAN - IT IS TIME FOR TOUGH DECISIONS. WHO AFTER PRESIDENT KARZAI?**

**– Interview with Haroun Mir –**

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**ARGO asked Haroun Mir, Co-Founder and Deputy Director of Afghanistan's Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS), an assessment on some of the most relevant political and security issues of his country and the whole region. Here is his contribution.**

#### **1. CREATION OF TRIBAL MILITIAS IN THE PASHTUN-DOMINATED AREAS**

The idea of empowering Afghans to fight for their own country is the right one because Afghans can better defend their villages and homes than NATO forces in Afghanistan. Tribal militias were effectively used by the communist regime in Afghanistan from 1989 to 1992. Despite the fact that no one had given the communist regime more than a couple of weeks after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, it was able to survive close to three years because it could bring a number of jihadi commanders and tribal leaders onto its payroll and use them against other mujahidin commanders.

This initiative will again work if it is well-planned and -coordinated, transparent and accepted by a majority of the Afghan people. Afghans should not consider this just an exit strategy (of international forces) because it will backfire against NATO troops and the Afghan government. In fact, survival is of the utmost concern for Afghans. If they doubt NATO's long-term commitment in Afghanistan they could shift their allegiance to the side of the winners, which in this case will be the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

Today the situation in Afghanistan is different. The model of arming tribal militias is copied from the example from Iraq rather than from the successful example of the communist regime in Afghanistan. There are a lot of unanswered questions about arming tribal militias. First of all it is contrary to the initial strategy of the Afghan government, which was aimed at disarming all militia fighters through DDR and DIAG programs. In fact, the international community invested millions of US dollars in order to disarm people in Afghanistan and now

we want to re-arm them. Second, who should NATO and the Afghan government arm as potential tribal militias? How is the process of selecting militia fighters carried out and who should do it? In fact, during the past three decades Afghans have fought amongst each other along ideological fault lines, tribal affinities, and for many other reasons. There is a tremendous risk that arbitrarily arming people will increase tension among different tribes and family clans in southern Afghanistan on one side and different ethnic groups in the north on the other side. I think we should learn from the situation in Afghanistan in the early 1990s after the collapse of the communist regime. One of the reasons why Taliban emerged in Kandahar was because the people had had enough of watching warlords fight over local resources. So, we have to be careful to avoid providing the Taliban legitimacy just by recreating the conditions of the early 1990s. Third, is there any mechanism to control and monitor these militia fighters? Currently the Afghan government has difficulties in controlling and monitoring police forces in the southern provinces. Some of these police forces are loyal to the Afghan government during the daytime and become insurgents during the night. If the Afghan government is unable to limit the Taliban infiltration into the police, then how would it be able to control the Taliban infiltration into the militia forces and who should be given this task? Fourth, what will the Afghan government and NATO forces tell the people in the north? Would they accept watching people in the south being re-armed to become potential Taliban fighters while they are being disarmed? There are enough countries in the region that are hostile towards the US local interests, which could help the people in the north to re-arm. In fact, in the 1990s Afghanistan was turned into a theatre for a proxy war by those countries and we should avoid providing them an incentive to re-exert their past influence.

I believe that the Afghan government and NATO will not be able to convince a majority of Afghans of their true intention which is to isolate Al-Qaida and hard-line Taliban from the rest of insurgent groups as was done by the US military in Iraq. In any case it will not be a long-term solution for Afghanistan. It might work for a while, just enough for NATO to declare victory but it will backfire because of Afghanistan's history of conflicts.

In my opinion it would be wise to invest more in the recruitment and training of a larger number of Afghan National Army soldiers, and to support the new Afghan Minister of Interior, Mr. Mohammad Hanif Atmar, in reforming the Afghan National Police. Because only by building and strengthening legal Afghan forces we can build confidence in Afghanistan and improve the legitimacy of the Afghan government.

## **2. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION**

In the course of next weeks political activities related to the presidential election in Afghanistan, the date of which has not yet been set and agreed upon, will become the main topic of discussion in Afghanistan as well as in NATO countries.

For the time being no major candidates have yet officially declared their candidature, even though we are aware of their intentions to run in the 2009 presidential election.

The United Front (UF) is involved in an internal struggle to reach an agreement among its key members in order to present their own candidate or to stand behind someone who could seriously challenge President Karzai. At this stage they have not yet reached a consensus because its founding members have diverging personal interests, since they are mainly interested in regaining their lost political influence in the future government. For instance, Ahmad Zia Massoud, the first Vice President, is interested to run as UF's candidate against Karzai but others within the Front might oppose him. My expectation is that at the end the UF will disintegrate and its founding members will each individually support a candidate of their own choice.

Well-known names who are thought to present a serious challenge to President Karzai include Ashraf Ghani, Ali Ahmed Jalali, and potentially Zalmay Khalilzad. However, only Ashraf Ghani has become politically very active in the country, while Jalali still resides and works in the US and Khalilzad has not yet expressed his intentions.

In order to seriously challenge President Karzai, these candidates need to create a coalition opposing him. If they all run individually and run negative campaigns against each other, they will only increase the chances of President Karzai.

Aside UF, there is a number of influential regional figures to be reckoned with such as former mujahidin commanders and some powerful governors such as Mr. Mohammad Atta in Balkh province and Gul Agha Shirzai in Nangarhar province. These might side with a potential winner.

In addition we have to understand that holding political power is crucial to Afghan politicians because there will be no organized opposition due to the absence of national political parties. Politicians in Afghanistan will try to choose the side of the winner. In order for the opposition to defeat President Karzai it has to form a new coalition based on an agreed political agenda. So, which candidate will have a good chance to defeat President Karzai? It

is not known yet because no one has conducted a political survey or opinion poll about the candidates.

We have to be aware that Afghanistan is a nascent democracy without big national parties. Of all the candidates only President Karzai has the disposal of the government apparatuses in his support; he will have the time and the resources to run an effective national campaign. Also, the people's final decision will not be based on the candidates' political, economic, and national security agendas because none of them have yet offered their vision for the future of Afghanistan. The outcome of the election will again be based on the personality of the candidates.

For the time being the only serious presidential contender who has offered a genuine solution to the Afghan problems is Ashraf Ghani. In addition, he has the required experience and international respect to become Afghanistan's future president.

Ultimately, in the eyes of Afghans, the candidate who will have the backing of the new US administration will have a better chance to win the election because after all Afghanistan is a very poor country and no candidate disposes of sufficient personal wealth and domestic funding to finance his/her campaign. Foreign sources of funding will be very important for the presidential election in Afghanistan, and there are many countries in the region, which could afford to spend several million US dollars in an effort to influence the outcome of the elections to further their own interests in Afghanistan. The decision either to remain neutral and let regional countries influence the outcome of the election, or to intervene and back a candidate who could create a new momentum in Afghanistan will be left to the US and its European allies.

### **3. RECONSTRUCTION**

If one has to assess the reconstruction and development works in Afghanistan, I'm sure the report would be very grim. Indeed, the Afghan administration, notably President Karzai, failed to deliver what was promised to the Afghan people during his presidential campaign in 2004. There are plenty of reasons for the failure of the reconstruction and development in Afghanistan: corruption, nepotism, incompetence of senior government officials, and many more. It is important for Afghanistan and NATO countries which have forces in Afghanistan that the mistakes of President Karzai made in the last five years, are not repeated during the next five years.

The main donor countries of the international community are also to be blamed for failure of the reconstruction and development in Afghanistan, because the bulk of aid money was managed by the donor countries themselves. According to a number of recent studies less than 40% of aid money remained in Afghanistan and went to Afghan people while 60% went back to donor countries.

The list of mistakes made by donor countries through their NGOs and private development agencies can be very long but this is not a time to become involved in a blame game because it will not solve problems in Afghanistan. The international community should learn from its mistakes in the last seven years and avoid repeating them in the next five years.

We cannot stabilize and rebuild a war-torn country like Afghanistan with an army of private contractors and subcontractors who are motivated by their pursuit of profit. NGOs and other humanitarian agencies are important in times of humanitarian crisis but they lack expertise to participate in reconstruction projects. The important issue concerning development projects in Afghanistan is a lack of economic vision regarding the future of the country. In addition to war related issues, we are facing new challenges such as the food crisis and the rapid growth of the population, which will increase poverty in the country. Until now all major reconstruction and development policies and strategies have had little focus on an economic vision for the country. Should Afghanistan remain an agricultural country? Could Afghanistan invest in industrial production? Should Afghanistan become a free transit zone between south and central Asia as well as China and the Middle East? What are Afghanistan's comparative advantages? First we need to create a vision and then we can provide an incentive for the Afghan private sector and attract foreign investment in the country. For instance, Afghanistan is rich in terms of natural resources and energy and still no investment has been made in this crucial sector of the economy. There is enough natural gas and coal to generate all the energy the Afghan people require, but we have not witnessed the construction of a single power plant, which uses Afghanistan's own natural resources. Meanwhile, the Afghan ministry of Energy and Water Management was unable to spend all of its development budget for 2008.

While the US is developing a new military strategy for Afghanistan, donor countries should do the same to develop a new reconstruction and development strategy. Drafting bulky documents such as Afghanistan's National Development Strategy, which no one in Afghanistan reads, is indeed intellectually stimulating to the foreign advisors and experts who have written them, but they did not improve the economic situation in Afghanistan. For instance, seven years after the strong international commitment was given, people in the Afghan capital still die because of shortage of food and cold conditions. How can we explain to the Afghan people that Afghanistan's National Development Strategy (ANDS) requires the private sector to deal with market inefficiencies when it comes to the food crisis? Yet, in the meantime in the most liberal free market economy of the world the authorities have

bailed out financial institutions for reasons of national interest. At the same time in Afghanistan the idea of creating a strategic food reserve to prevent people from dying is apparently unacceptable to officials of international multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and IMF.

Another reason for the failure of development projects in Afghanistan is a lack of coordination among donor countries. Each donor country is involved in (a) different reconstruction and development project(s) without coordinating their efforts with each other and with the Afghan authorities.

I believe that it is time to appoint a development czar for Afghanistan with enough power and authority to influence the decisions of donor countries and impose his will on the Afghan government. I argued my idea in one of my published articles “in need of czar”. In my opinion a retired military commander, preferably an American, who has dealt with development issues in a war-torn country like Afghanistan would be the right person to supervise reconstruction and development projects in Afghanistan. He should have the guts to oppose donor countries and the Afghan authorities.