

AFGHANISTAN: On the eve of the vote
Conversation with Dr Zalmay Rassoul

by Giulio Brigante Colonna

With a few days left to elections the overall situation in Afghanistan is blurred. The current news reports show the US offensive in Helmand has not eradicated the insurgent threat in the area, allied casualties have risen dramatically, Taliban attacks on candidates and threats to voters are routine while control over parts of the country (mainly the South/South-East) is not assured thus leaving many question marks on the validity and outcome of the August 20th elections.

Afghanistan is facing a crossroads, the new US led “AfPak” strategy aimed at freeing the region from Al Qaida requires on the ground military presence to regain control of the territory and strengthen government institutions. This military strategy should be supported by an enhanced civilian approach aimed at improving the life of Afghans and isolating the Taliban. However, as we saw in Iraq, things will not change overnight. The strengthened US focus in the region and the presence of NATO forces show the will of the West to set Afghanistan on a path to democracy and stability. From this perspective, elections represent the hallmark of democracy and are a first but vital step to reach that common goal.

We had a chance to have a brief conversation with Dr Zalmay Rassoul (National Security Adviser) on how he sees the security situation in the wake of the elections. What emerges is a mixed picture with North, West and Central Afghanistan quite stable posing no security problem for the elections but also “security challenges in the South and the East for which the international community and we are working on. I am confident that despite all these challenges we will have an acceptable election.”

The South East is the area adjacent to the Pakistan border where Taliban militants have their strongholds. This area, also known as the “Pashtun Belt”, is politically very important because it is home to the Pashtun majority (42% of the total population). “We [the Afghan Government and the International Community] are doing our best so that all Afghans should be able to vote in order that the outcome of the election should not be questioned”. This represents the greatest challenge for the legitimacy of the upcoming vote.

The Pakistani side of the “Pashtun Belt” is the ground of the ongoing military campaign in the Swat Valley and in South Waziristan to hunt down armed groups that launch attacks in Afghanistan and target Pakistan’s cities. These groups were initially supported by Pakistan’s intelligence (the Inter Services Intelligence) to fight the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and subsequently to destabilize India by launching attacks in Kashmir. They eventually allied with Al Qaida and Osama Bin Laden and started launching attacks in the West. The Afghan Pakistan border areas gradually became the operational base for the Taliban and Al Qaida with the Pakistani government turning a blind eye. This policy recently changed when Taliban groups extended their actions to the rest of the country undermining the authority of the Pakistan government.

Dr Rassoul praised the latest developments in Pakistan, “The recent military operation in the Swat Valley and South Waziristan by the Pakistan Army is the first positive step in fighting terrorism and extremism in the region. We hope that these operations will expand, particularly against those Taliban who are infiltrating inside Afghanistan and fighting against us.”

Another key issue influencing the elections is the increase, in the past years, in Afghan civilian casualties caused by Allied (particularly US) air raids. These deaths have alienated part of the population and triggered repeated appeals by Karzai to stop this kind of action. The troop surge and the change of strategy brought by General McChrystal (Commander ISAF and US Forces in Afghanistan) have brought a reduction of air raids and an increased focus on ground forces to regain control of towns and protect the local population by living amongst the people and opening dialogue with the local power brokers. “The recent military operations by the Afghan National Security, NATO and US forces have given satisfactory results. There has been minimum civilian casualties and minimum use of air power.” Dr Rassoul is satisfied with the new approach but warns that the secured areas “should become administratively active and development projects should start.”

“We are fully committed to cooperate with Pakistan to fight and eliminate terrorism and extremism in this part of the world.” This commitment could be the best prologue for a new era of cooperation between the international community and the Afghan government (that comes out of the ballot) to pull Afghanistan out of the conflict and instability of the past quarter century. Moreover the holding of “reasonably” representative and fair elections in Afghanistan would be a great sign of the will of the people not to give in to terrorism and emerge as the sovereign body of the country.