



ORF Discourse

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Afghanistan: No Sign of End to Instability

A round-table discussion on Afghanistan was organised by Observer Research Foundation recently. The meeting was chaired by Mr Vikram Sood, former Secretary, Research and Analysis Wing, and currently Vice President, ORF Centre for International Affairs. The following is a summary of the discussion.

The situation in Afghanistan is grim. There is a tendency to confuse random acts of violence with the instability caused by the the Taliban or the neo-Taliban. An analysis of the violent incidents in Afghanistan in the past few years has revealed that more than two-thirds of the violence has been related to land, resources or power-politics, pointing towards unequal sharing of power at the sub-national level. There are two aspects to the whole situation in Afghanistan. From the international angle, there are multiple agendas like counter insurgency, counter terrorism, drugs and narcotics, state building, democratization and development. All these are not complementary; in fact, many of these work against each other. From the national angle, there is instability, insecurity, and Talibanisation, the result of a fractured political process. Poor governance and inadequate reconstruction have led to rising instability, alienated the population, and led to a booming opium industry. Thus, the grim situation in Afghanistan essentially points towards a lack of legitimacy of the State. The statement, "Karzai is the mayor of Kabul", conveys the reality.

The State is seen as legitimate when the people see it as providing them the basic services. Basic services not only include health, education, sanitation etc., in which the Kabul government has done well, but also governance, security and essential elements of justice backed by the feeling of inclusion, the sense of, 'I am a part of the state'.

The Taliban rule disintegrated very fast. When the

Northern Alliance walked into Kabul, it was too fast for anyone to come to grips with, leaving the process of state formation incomplete. Normal post conflict settlements call for some sort of meeting of minds between different parties to the conflict but in the case of Afghanistan post 9/11, it was missing. Today there is a lot of criticism that the consequent process should have included the Taliban. It is easier said than done. It was unlikely that just after 9/11, the Americans would have sat with the Taliban or that the Northern Alliance would have talked to the Taliban. Furthermore, the Taliban did not exist as a structured unit in December 2001.

The second crucial fact is that initially it was the Northern Alliance that dominated the country, but gradually Hamid Karzai managed to marginalise it considerably. Now, many people who were earlier marginalised are in positions of power. This transition did not help in the evolution of a democratic polity. For instance, elections are held to the National Assembly and even to provincial councils, but without any statute or rule as to what these elected bodies are meant to do.

At different levels of the government, the old politics of patronage and networking, not only remains but is flourishing. Thus, the warlords, commanders and militias have become much stronger than what they were in the past. While in principle there is a formal structure of State in place, the informal structures have become much stronger, a clear indication that the State-building process

remains flawed. This is the reason why the State is not seen as a legitimate entity.

Some of the reasons for the flawed State formation are:

1. The State of Justice and Police

Almost 80 per cent of all the disputes are settled outside the formal system. Even if people want to, they are not able to go to the formal system as it is either non-existent or very corrupt. Since 2001, there have been a lot of legal developments in Afghanistan; commercial, civil and criminal laws have been put in place and these are fairly secular.

Most of the private disputes are settled within the family. Public disputes, like a fight over land or resources, are solved through traditional methods which take a lot of time. For instance, in the Pashtun area they have their own codes of behaviour. The formal structure is seen as weak and non-acceptable because of its corruption and state capture; people in most parts of the country do not accept it.

The other organ of justice, not seen as an institution of justice, is the police. The police are seen as a counter insurgency outfit and not as upholders of public law. Secondly, the police force was created out of the various militias which were on the ruling side in September-October, 2001. Police attrition rates are very high due to lack of payment and threats from the Taliban. The policemen who work as private militias either look after their patrons, or help in the drugs trade, or turn a blind eye to it, or set up check posts and collect taxes. Therefore, the informal taxation rates are extremely high because of which the police are seen as part of the problem and not as part of the solution. Even the Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit's report dubbed them as "cops or robbers". In 2006, the government tried to set up a tribal militia in the south and the south-east as an auxiliary police. This was done with the hope that these people, based in the community, would not extort money from their own community members and would have a greater interest in defending them from the Taliban. But in most cases, the actual recruitment was done in an unscrupulous manner with local commanders being asked to bring people; the sort of protection the citizens wanted was absent.

2. Military

Compared to the police, the military's position is marginally better. Its public image is fairly good. Initially, the army's strength was very large. In 2002, its strength was 200,000 on paper. It had more than 2,500 Generals at that time. But now these numbers have come down

and a lot of young men have left the army. The army also realised that irregular hierarchies, local loyalties, and the absence of a sense of 'National Army' were detrimental to the formation and growth of a cohesive armed force.

There were valiant efforts by the Ministry of Defence to reform the army, some of which might have succeeded. But the government was keen to set up a National Army from scratch, broadly representative of the ethnic groups in the country. The current strength of the Afghan National Army is 42,000, of which not more than 20,000 are available to fight on any given day. It is a model of a traditional light infantry army. The soldiers are divided on ethnic lines, with 50 per cent Pashtun, 35 per cent Tazik, 6-7 per cent Hazara and 6-7 per cent Uzbek. At the most, they have had modest training.

More challenging is to set up the officer corps. This is because it takes a long process of evolution and tradition to develop the concept of a cohesive, loyal and committed armed force. The Afghan National Army is very heavily mentored. While the mentors do facilitate the process of growth, they also act as stumbling blocks for indigenous initiatives. Also, not enough efforts have been undertaken in developing the army's capability in terms of ammunitions or logistics and communication. Thus, even today the Afghan National Army acts as a subordinate wing of the US Army.

However, there are minor but noticeable changes taking place. While earlier the Afghan Army used to move in Company strength, now the movement is in battalion strength. Since the army lacks numbers, it faces serious operational difficulties, especially in the US tactics of Clear, Sweep and Hold. With the help of the US Army, the Afghan Army does manage to clear and sweep but remains ineffective in holding the ground.

The other problem is of two commands operating at the same time—besides the Afghan National Army, NATO-led forces are equally occupied in the country with distinct chains of command. The problem is that NATO, a superior force in terms of technology and command, has only a limited force on the ground—I:1000 Afghans.—and hence is unable to help the local Army in countering the Taliban and other threats effectively. NATO forces are also handicapped by different caveats followed by member countries; most of the participants, for instance, do not involve themselves in combat situations; they are content with support roles. Another problem faced by the Afghan Army is the hit-and-run tactics adopted by the Taliban, leaving its inadequately trained soldiers on the defensive. Since there is not enough ground intelligence, there is a lot of collateral damage in these operations.

A lesser known but equally critical problem faced by the nascent Army is the system of patronage which continues

to be a key factor in Afghanistan. Lack of soldiers on the ground, absence of direct contact with the enemy and lack of local intelligence have forced the international military alliance to empower large number of commanders (warlords) in the country. This large body of local leaders with money and power has a direct negative effect on the State building process. Traditional tribal structures have broken down considerably; armed men, the mullah, have become powerful. In a country where jihad has lasted for more than 10 years, the social structure has been a casualty. Instead of developing an alternate democratic model, a new body of people emerged who are equally violent and are seen by the citizens as the cause of violence. This has created a situation where a large number of people feel excluded by the State.

3. Failure of a democratic model in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has a flawed Constitution for the simple reason it is based entirely on the American Constitution. Even historically, the need for a centralised autonomy in Afghanistan has been reiterated. In Afghanistan, the local elites or the 'Walis' work autonomously and brook no check and balance. Although there is an elected Parliament, its control on the executive is very weak. The elected provincial councils have no power. Many districts are not even registered and are treated as sub-tribes. Thus, instead of an inclusive system, an exclusive system has been created, negating any semblance of unity or providing rights to the people of Afghanistan.

The report has been prepared by Ms. Sushmita Nath, Research Intern, ORF.



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