Axes to grind in Afghanistan

The New Zealand Herald
06/07/2005
By Montague Walker

By any definition, on September 10, 2001, Afghanistan was a failed state. The following day the terrorist attacks in America ushered in a dramatic change. The United States suddenly took a real interest in the Taleban regime that was playing host to Osama bin Laden.

The following month the US and its allies began the air attacks which allowed the Taleban’s Afghan opponents to sweep them from power. Kabul was retaken in November and by early December the Taleban had given up their stronghold of Kandahar.

Now, the claim is that Afghanistan is an American foreign policy success story, on its way to good international citizenship and building a democratic freedom with elections. While that may eventually be so, the road may not be as well-paved as many believe.

Security problems are mounting. One parliamentary candidate has been murdered. An Italian aid worker has been kidnapped in Kabul. Nato headquarters has been the target of a rocket attack, and seven Afghans were injured by a roadside bomb in Kabul, apparently aimed at a coalition vehicle.

To my mind, the structural problems of this nation remain.

Afghanistan is home to three broad, competing areas. Loosely speaking, the east, southeast and south are one bloc and contain the strongholds of the Taleban and their allies. The dominant ethnic group here is the Pashtun, the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, making up 52 per cent of the population.

The northeast, north and west are another bloc and in part make up the so-called “Northern Alliance” that, with the aid of US air support and smart troop allocation, outed the Taleban in 2001.

Here is a mix of Tajik, Uzbek and Turkmen ethnicities, making up 30 per cent of the population, ancestrally derived from the countries on Afghanistan’s northern border.

The third area is Kabul, the seat of power. It is a city of four million, a mixed racial centre that sits outside the traditional power base for each of the ethnicities, ensuring none can claim it as their own.

It is the largest concentration of people and wealth in Afghanistan and the most effective place for making a point, politically or otherwise.
I deliberately do not add the Central Highlands in this grouping as it is so far removed from normal Afghan life, it does not qualify as a political force.

Isolated and peaceful by comparison, it was largely ignored by the Soviets and Taleban. It is populated by the Hazars, direct descendants of Genghis Khan, and they are intent on keeping it that way.

The key division in Afghanistan is between the first two blocs. Those in the south and east of the country are on the way out of power, while those in the north and west are on the rise, keen to see what they believe are the rightful spoils of victory.

Add to this the traditional Afghan power structure and the fact that the southern bloc is the established ruler, and it is easy to understand why there is a recipe for a political Gordian knot.

With the presidential election last year, the situation was placated to a large degree, as Hamid Karzai is Pashtun. Traditional power was appeased - despite the loss of the total grip on power they had enjoyed for so long - by the fact that one of their own was to be in charge.

This year, it is another story.

While the "Northern Alliance", a term which is a Western invention not heard in Afghanistan, were prepared to sit on their hands and wait, they are now hungry for power and patience has run out.

Powerful individuals live in these areas, many with private armies. Some are also allegedly major figures in the drugs trade, which makes for a volatile mix - a security nightmare.

Security assessments for the parliamentary elections draw on last year's election experiences.

There is no doubt that the success of the presidential election last year was because the Afghans wanted it that way.

The experience in Kabul was the closest I have seen to a celebration here. We were braced for trouble, awaiting the attacks from the Taleban and others, yet nothing happened of any note. The absence of violence enhanced the celebration.

This year I am not so confident.

If it is the conclusion that the critical component in last year's elections was the Afghans' desire for success, it follows that should that desire change, so will the chances for success in the parliamentary elections.

The defeat of the Soviets in the early 1990s showed that factionalism is the overriding political consideration in Afghanistan.

The country tore itself to pieces in a post-victory civil war that led directly to Taleban rule.
I believe we are on the brink of a similar scenario now. Perhaps not a full civil war like the 1990s - the international military presence will negate that - but a struggle for power that will see individuals and their supporters targeted as rivals manoeuvre for position ahead of election day. A candidate has been murdered in the southeast and other suspicious killings have also been recorded.

Afghan willingness for success remains the greatest hope, but that possibility is clouded by the chance that those in the international community, and the Afghans keen for change, are trying to do too much, too quickly.

It is difficult to explain why we are trying to hold elections in a nation that has never known democracy.

It is still disarming from its last conflict and is a country that has what can only be described as a fledgling social infrastructure at best.

I subscribe closely to the belief that order must precede democracy and Afghanistan is on a knife-edge, one that could go either way.

The Government is simply not strong enough to assert complete control over the country. It is widely acknowledged that its power is limited outside Kabul and the "law of the gun" exists in most places elsewhere.

If it is not anti-government forces directly attempting disruption efforts to their own ends, then it is warlords and their armies trying to directly, or indirectly, achieve the same.

Afghanistan is a nation that has largely reverted to a feudal age, a result of 23 years of continuous war, and the feudal warlords remain the biggest concern.

While I am reluctant to write off the Taleban, a counter-insurgency war takes such a tremendous amount of time to win I doubt they will ever be in a position to take complete power here again.

The warlords are another story.

Emboldened by their role in America's response to the Taleban, the leaders of the Northern Alliance want their dues.

They are an unsavoury lot but many hope to achieve legitimacy by running as candidates in the Parliamentary elections.

Many are suspected war criminals and Afghanistan has not yet the infrastructure to comprehensively investigate and try the "commonly known" criminals - those who are the talk of the bazaar, but who have not been brought to trial.

The candidate nomination phase of the election process has just finished.

We are now bracing ourselves for reaction when some candidates are told that they are not eligible to stand. Some will be powerful individuals with a history of organised violence and now with another axe to grind.

http://e-ariana.com/ariana/eariana.nsf/allArticles/DA5B999B012147FB8725701500612CC... 7/20/2005
It is a long, hard road for Afghanistan and one that faces many challenges leading to September’s vote and beyond.

To use an analogy, instead of buying a reliable second-hand car for the journey, Afghanistan has set its sights on the latest model Cadillac.

There are many here who are not convinced that Afghanistan can afford the payments or fully understand the terms of the agreement.

* Montague Walker is the nom de plume of a New Zealander working in Afghanistan as a freelance journalist. He has been living in the region for 18 months after experience in other conflict zones including East Timor and the Solomon Islands. He is based out of Kabul and travels extensively through Afghanistan.
Misspent: A people's good will
International Herald Tribune (05/21/2005)

Afghan Poppycock, Hamid Karzai's halfhearted jihad
Slate (05/20/2005)

Marching to a Different Tune
IWPR (05/18/2005)

What Is Fueling The Anti-U.S. Demonstrations?
RFE/RL (05/15/2005)

Afghan "pipe dream" draws closer to reality
The Christian Science Monitor (05/13/2005)

Male, single: Get out of here
Der Spiegel (05/12/2005)

Afghan action hero does battle with the opium trade
The Independent, UK (05/11/2005)

An Afghan perspective on the British monarchy
OpenDemocracy (05/11/2005)

A "Greater Central Asia Partnership" for Afghanistan and Its Neighbors
The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute (05/10/2005)

Afghan woman named international editor of the year
RFE/RL (05/10/2005)

Qanuni alleges pre-poll rigging
Pajhwok Afghan News (05/05/2005)

Afghanistan - Annual report 2005
Reporters sans frontières (05/03/2005)

Kabul street children may lose 'nest'
BBC (04/14/2005)

Afghanistan's dance with the Taliban
Asia Times (03/18/2005)

"State building on the cheap"
The Nation (03/16/2005)

The wrong voting system
International Herald Tribune (03/15/2005)

Meanwhile in Afghanistan
Reason (03/10/2005)

back to top