

Babak Khalatbari; Christian Ruck: Five Years after the Taliban. Current Developments in the Hindu Kush

At the moment, five years after the expulsion of the Taliban, the future of Afghanistan is difficult to predict. The country is torn apart, and it seems that the help of the international community is no longer effective. The international community, for whom there is much at stake, must realise that neither a policy of the lowest common denominator nor chequebook diplomacy will lead to enduring success. Instead, what is needed is a policy which takes small steps one at a time.

When the USA started to bomb Afghanistan in October 2001, it managed to defeat the Taliban in a few weeks, and the development of a democratic system could begin. Important steps were taken in the process of institutionalising the state, and the parliamentary elections of 2005 marked the successful conclusion of the post-Bonn process.

However, there are problems as well. The reputation of some of the members of the new parliament is tainted; the enormous heterogeneity of the House, in which not parties but individuals are represented, affects the work of parliament and hampers the formation of alliances and coalitions. Moreover, the lack of democratic traditions in Afghanistan keeps parliament from fulfilling its basic functions. To the voter and even the Western observer, the votes of some Members of Parliament, for example, appear to be up for sale. And finally, only one fourth of the MPs are women – a deficit which is even more apparent in the cabinet.

The step towards introducing democracy in substance is one that Afghanistan will certainly have to take at some point in the future. Because of the deteriorating conditions in the country, calls for a hard but just leadership are growing louder and louder. However, statehood, meaning security and a functioning bureaucracy in particular, does not yet exist in Afghanistan. Threatening the process of reconstruction, the desolate security situation in the Hindu Kush hardly permits considering the closing year a success.

The military operations conducted in the Afghan south in 2006 were by no means fruitful. At best, they left scorched earth behind, and the resistance of the Taliban claimed the lives of 160 foreign soldiers. In October of the same year, General David Richards, commander of the ISAF, gave to understand that 70 percent of all Afghans would switch their loyalty to the Taliban if NATO did not succeed in improving the country's economy soon and sustainably.

However, not only is the violent resistance of opposition forces increasing, the number of terrorist outrages is growing as well. Since the beginning of the year, there have been more than 80 suicide attacks, some of them showing a new and alarming quality. The European Union's special representative, Francesc Vendrell, showed concern about the security of many European soldiers, and NATO's Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, referred to Afghanistan as 'NATO's most important operation'. Home-made bombs, occasionally exploded by the Afghans themselves, are used more and more frequently; bicycles and donkeys often become a deadly threat. Once again, recruits are flocking to the opposition forces, especially the Taliban, who instruct new combatants in mobile training camps. It seems that within the framework of the process of reconciliation and integration, Taliban cadres have returned to build up new structures. And finally, the drug problem is still unsolved: Compared to the previous year, the yield of raw opium has risen by 50 percent.

All over the country, the security situation is growing more acute, threatening especially education which is so important for the future of Afghanistan: In the first half of the year alone, more than 200 schools were destroyed by attacks. Because of the insecure living conditions,

people call for a new power to impose sanctions. The suggestion to reintroduce the religious police met with general approval – in the streets as well as in politics. In the summer of 2006, even President Hamid Karzai supported the demand of a Muslim council to reappoint the vice squad, which under the Taliban had applied severe penalties to enforce the Sharia.

Liberal forces, on the other hand, warn of fatal developments looming ahead. They talk about fundamentalism and extremism for which, according to the democratic parliamentarian Abdul Kabir Ranjbar, the floodgates have been opened, and about the religious police which, once established, would be difficult to get rid of. The people hardly know what policemen and judges stand for. On the contrary – what they see is corruption instead of security, and a state unable to fulfil its basic functions.

The young democratic state is facing difficult tasks and hurdles. In 2006, it still showed enormous deficits. Constant increases in the cost of living resulted in poverty. Furthermore, there are the streams of refugees that, on the one hand, further exacerbate the supply problem, and on the other, constitute an ideal recruitment pool for radical forces. To meet these challenges, great endeavours are needed on both the Afghan and the international side. The fact is that the success of the old strategies and concepts is limited.

International development cooperation in Afghanistan is still very uncoordinated. There are different concepts in the military and the civilian area that need to be harmonised. While the Afghans demand more and more independence in using their funds, the donors still think the country's government too weak to manage the distribution of funds efficiently. What also needs to be corrected is the civil-service pay system, one case in point being that of the university professor who works as a taxi driver to mend his wages.

If cooperation is to be 'Afghanised', it is absolutely essential that foreign forces get involved with the local people and their customs and consent to engage themselves for a long time. Moreover, involving Afghan authorities in the administration of the country would show the population that its own democratically elected state is quite capable of satisfying the fundamental needs of its citizens. In this context, a well-balanced personnel policy would be desirable.

German development cooperation still concentrates on certain parts of the country, i.e. Kabul and the north. If the Federal Republic intends to contribute to stabilising the elected government, it would be advisable to expand its engagement to other parts of the country, thus correcting the geographical imbalance. One possibility would be for Germany to resume its activities in those regions in which it was successful years ago and achieved a good reputation – i.e. in the Khost and Bakthiar provinces.

One prerequisite for the overall success of Afghanistan's reconstruction is the effective suppression of the drug economy. To be sure, gaining access to all those regions of the country in which poppy is cultivated is difficult even for a well-equipped police force. In this context, a successfully implemented market economy would be of great importance. However, it is indispensable that moderate mullahs and traditional religious and tribal leaders approve the fight against the drug economy.

In its Afghanistan concept presented in September 2006, the Federal Government addressed many of these issues, concluding that there is no alternative to continuing Germany's engagement in the country in the Hindu Kush. Quite rightly, it pointed out that Afghanistan is certainly not only a synonym for 'messages of doom and horror'. Rather, as it emphasised, there are numerous positive developments and tendencies that do encourage further engagement.

