

OPTING OUT IS DANGEROUS: CHALLENGES CONFRONTING THE INCOMING US PRESIDENT IN AFGHANISTAN

Thomas Ruttig

'Improve your own esteem in the world!' This is the advice recently given by the French head of state, Mr Sarkozy, to the US secretary of state, Mrs Rice, when she asked him on behalf of the leaders in Washington what the US could do for him. And indeed it is necessary to take action, especially in Afghanistan. How to convince the local population that all the US-led coalition with its soldiers, advisers, and aid workers is after is to improve the lot of the Afghans? That is the question.

Afghanistan has been neither rebuilt nor stabilized since 2001. The people are badly off, the Taliban are operating all over the country again, and using the trunk roads, the showcase project of the West and the prime standard by which its success is measured, is a life-threatening business, if it can be done at all.

As the failure of the intervention became evident, the insurgency attracted more men. The people's lack of perspectives and their despair over rampant corruption have been adding to the strength of the Taliban ever since 2001. Many Afghans believe that it is foreign rule which is responsible for their persistent ills.

The key problem is corruption at the very head of the state. The reports about president Karzai's brother being involved in drug trafficking speak for themselves. Barack Obama, who presumably understands the structure of the problem, recently declared that keeping up the forceful occupation would not solve the problem, and that any approach would have to take the country's history into account. Following up some of the warnings often repeated by critical authors, he advocated enhancing the training of Afghanistan's security forces, improving the coordination of the judicial system, increasing the efficiency of military operations, extending coordination with the NATO partners, and stepping up the suppression of drug trafficking.

However, Mr Obama's change rhetoric has not manifested itself in practice so far. On the contrary, the decisions he has made with respect to Afghanistan hint at continuity and thus at the ongoing predominance of a policy in which military means have priority. Thus, three additional brigades have been moved to Afghanistan, and there has been no change in the ratio of military to civilian expenditures. Similarly, the changes of course announced by Mr Petraeus, the head of CENTCOM, and Mr Gates, the secretary of defence, in the course of the last two years have remained either unrealized or unsuccessful. The military mini-surge cannot really be seen as heralding a new ap-

proach. Thus, for example, a unified leadership is needed for the forces of both NATO and the US. Announced early in December, the ISAF's intention to involve Afghan soldiers in all operations did make people sit up. But then, no Afghans will be participating in the close air support of ground operations.

Another point is that Afghanistan is not Iraq. For one thing, Afghanistan is geographically more complex and socially and politically more fragmented. For another, it is controversial whether the surge will have any sustained positive effect on security in Iraq. Far from strengthening morale, al Qaeda's attacks on cooperative tribal elders render any feeling of security ephemeral. Mr Obama does mention NATO but not the United Nations. Yet the reason for the present problems lies in the fact that Russia, China, Iran, and other countries left the political process which they had supported up to the Petersberg meeting in disapproval of the transfer of leadership to NATO.

Finally, there is no sign of any strategic concept for the region that includes Pakistan. This being so, Mr Obama's willingness to enhance military operations on Pakistani territory in the future appears rather counter-productive for various reasons.

The incoming US president and his allies would be well advised to begin by concentrating on the civilian components of a comprehensive concept for Afghanistan, namely the implementation of the fundamental elements of the rule of law and the political participation of the people. Sub-national institutions, such as provincial and district administrations, need air to breathe. In the environment that currently prevails at this level, committed civil servants cannot survive; they are either marginalized or swallowed up in the mire of corruption. There will be an opportunity to reform these structures before the presidential elections of next year. If Mr Karzai should be given any fresh funds, these should be tied to political conditions. Wherever institutions are being set up, an eye should be kept on where and how the funds provided are being used. At all events, the much-hyped Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board is nothing but an inefficient paper tiger paralyzed by corruption on the Afghan side.

The same may be said about the tribal militias raised on the Iraqi model which, so Afghanistan's allies like to think, will fill the gap left by the lack of trained Afghan soldiers and policemen. However, merely transplanting a supposedly successful approach from another country is a grave mistake, as can be seen from a look at Afghanistan's history – the period of Soviet occupation in the eighties, the arbitrary rule of the Mujahideen militias, and the subsequent rise of the Taliban.

The Mujahideen were mainly active at election time, when they forced the people to cast their vote according to their directions. Today, many of their

troops and sub-commanders are ministers, under-secretaries, senators, MPs, general staff members, or police commanders. Those militias that still exist are undermining the official police which the Bush administration refused to support, preferring to set up parallel structures.

The commander of the militia is Mr Matiullah, one-time chief of the highway patrol which was disbanded in 2007 and one of the notables of the provincial capital of Tirinkot in the south of Afghanistan. When his position was abolished he took over the highway patrol on his own account, while the regular police force were afraid to leave their barracks. Matiullah's people, well-motorized young men wearing civilian dress and bulging cartridge belts and carrying modern assault rifles, still rule the roost in the town today.

Once the attempt to demilitarize the Afghan institutions had failed, the promise of democratization lost much of its attractiveness in the eyes of many Afghans, although an order which features pluralism and the rule of law should have appeared a desirable alternative to the three authoritarian groups that ruled the country before – the communists, the Mujahideen, the Taliban. Such an order, however, was not given a chance: instead of disappearing in the transition process that was initiated in 2001, the militias succeeded in consolidating their position.

It is often said today that Afghanistan is not mature enough for democracy. In fact, the country's society is no longer uniformly conservative after three decades of civil war. Various cleavages have emerged. Today's society is dominated by modernization, globalization, a young urban population with contacts to the outer world, and millions of refugees home again from Pakistan and Iran where they came to know modern educational systems that are open to girls, all of which feeds a desire for openness and diversity. Yet many Afghans no longer appreciate the kind of democracy they are experiencing. At the very least, they say that the democracy imported and imposed by the US has failed, and that the USA, when all is said and done, is fairly disinterested in stabilizing the country.

It was the West itself which, after 2001, set the signals which led the Afghans to seek salvation in non-democratic alternatives today. It was the strategy of the West which weakened factors that might have promoted democracy and strengthened others that could not but harm it.

Barack Obama stands for the chance that all this might change. However, the Europeans would first have to formulate an autonomous, common, and committed Afghanistan policy which does not leave the Afghans to face the consequences of any mistakes. Just as importantly, Americans and Europeans would have to learn again to listen to those to whose future they are allegedly committed – the Afghans themselves.

IN: *Auslandsinformationen* 12/2008, ISSN 0177-7521, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
e. V., Berlin, p.102-105