

What Went Wrong in Afghanistan?

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خشت اول چو نهد معمار کج
تا ثریا می رود دیوار کج

(*Khisht-i-awal chun nehad memar kaj –Ta surraya mein rawad deegar kaj*) According to Farsi wisdom, if the builder lays down first brick curved, the wall would curve towards the sky. The story of Afghan adventure has been a litany of blunders, miscalculations, ignorance and arrogance on the part of US-led NATO forces during the years of occupation. Americans have been reinforcing failures and have landed themselves in a mess – from where there is no other alternative than to leave in shame.

The ousting of Taliban was probably the only alternative available to the international community for the rigid and uncompromising stance adopted by them during their rule; especially, after the bombing of the Twin Towers on 9/11. The threat of terrorism was real but the tactics adopted for this purpose were, however, faulty.

Kabul's Capture:

Against the sagacious advice of the well-intentioned Afghans and knowledgeable international well-wishers, including Pakistan, the Panjsher-based Northern Alliance was facilitated by the on ground US Special Forces named JAWBREAKERS team. The team was to bribe the leaders of Panjsheri warlords like Muhammad Qasim Faheem, Abdullah Abdullah, Yunas Qanuni, Engineer Arif, Yunas Qanuni, Bismillah Muammadi etc. to march on Kabul as succinctly explained by the CIA team leader, Gary C Schroen in his book, *First In*, to capture Kabul in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of Taliban. This was a

disastrous decision on the part of an arrogant power that was immune to reason and unaware of the essence of Afghan history and ethos. They handed over Afghanistan to warlords of Mujahedeen against whom the people had supported the extremist rule of Taliban. These mujahedeen warlords after coming to power were not only on rampage on the public property but were also being regularly paid by the Americans when ruling Afghanistan.

During my personal interaction in 2003, when there was a limited force of international community by the name of ISAF, I developed good relations with the German Special Force team in Kabul, who then invited me to their headquarters and asked me a specific question about Abdul Rab Rasul Siaz during our discussion. At that time, name of Mullah Umar was an anathema. I told them, hypothetically, that if the two men contest election against each other, I would start canvassing for Mullah Omar. (Siaz was considered a diehard fundamentalist who had humiliated and expelled two Afghan workers from his office in Chamkani during the anti-Soviet jihad for displaying their own photos in the office – it is, however, another story that he afterwards stands in each parliamentary election displaying his huge-size photo billboards on each intersection of Kabul City) They told me that he was being paid two hundred thousand dollars per month regularly by Americans.

Immediately after the capture of Kabul, President Bush termed this expedition a very economical mission that concluded with the cost of less than hundred million dollars advanced to the warlords of Panjsher albeit to Hamid Karzai and Gul Agha Sherzai in the south. The Panjsheris, like locust, swarmed Kabul under their warlords, occupied the citadels of power, and usurped public and private property. As against Bush's euphoric statement, this proved to be the most costly foreign mission of United States in its entire history, surpassing even the money used for Marshal Plan for the rebuilding of

Europe after the Second World War.

As estimated later in 2011, the Minister of Housing in Karzai administration admitted that about one and a half million jeribs of state land and property was illegally occupied only in Kabul and Mazar by these warlords and the state was unable to vacate it. These warlords dubbed every turbaned bearded Pakhtun Taliban and turned them to Americans, who humiliated, even sodomized (not publicly admitted as the stigma attached to such acts), and tortured them in their detention centers. Some of them were even sent to Guantanamo Bay. Ordinary citizens lost their houses and buildings and faced unprecedented hardships in the face of corrupt judiciary dominated by the warlord-like mentality. All government posts were stuffed with warlords and their supporters, soon joined by members of Afghan Diasporas based and supported by the countries that they were living in. These people made an unholy alliance with warlords in stripping the coffers of the state. Initially, the erstwhile Taliban were ready to compromise but Americans and their Afghan allies spurned them in contempt. This created backlash afterwards and swelled the ranks of Taliban.

Bonn Agreement:

In December 2001, under the aegis of United Nation, Bonn Conference was held with the participation of some of the Afghan representatives from Northern Alliance, Rome and Cyprus Conferences, Peshawar-based émigrés and others. This was not a representative gathering and was hastily held without any thorough spadework and preparation. The saner elements of Taliban, remnants of Nijibullah regime who had influences in the army, were totally ignored as unfit for any reconciliation.

Though apparently under the auspices of UN it represented by some dubious Afghan characters too, yet the international actors like Russia and Pakistan were not fully taken on board,

whose stakes in the stability of Afghanistan were beyond any doubt. Russians probably carried the past stigma of being inheritor of Soviet Union and Pakistan for being the staunch supporter of Taliban in recent past; both could have played positive role in the years to come. Invading Afghanistan without the expert advice of Moscow was also a big blunder.

Three names were initially circulated before the invasion: Abdul Haq, Gul Aqa Sherzai and Hamid Karzai. Abdul Haq was assassinated by Taliban in Logar while going to Kabul to facilitate the capture of Kabul, and Gul Aqa Sherzai was not considered to be capable for such a post. Pakistan also opted for Karzai. In the Bonn gathering, the choice of King Zahir Shah was Abdul Satar Seerat, his erstwhile Justice Minister – an Uzbek scholar living in exile in Saudi Arabia, who would have afterwards accepted and restored the constitutional monarchy led by former King Zahir Shah, the only unifying figure at the time. However, the Americans were determined upon bringing a system in accordance with their own image.

Domestically, the powerful Afghan forces who recently ruled Afghanistan, like the Taliban and the remnants of Watan Party, were also ignored. They were a force to be reckoned with; this totally negated the much needed reconciliation spirit which cost heavily to the international coalition in the end.

Bonn Agreement was also a faulty document which was never implemented in letter and spirit, and was later on amended. However, it stipulated the immediate installation of an Afghan Interim Authority and the formation of a commission for the convention of emergency Loya Jirga within six months deciding upon the establishment of Transitional Authority for 18 months, followed by convocation of constitutional Loya Jirga passing a permanent constitution, holding of free and fair election and induction of a permanent set up. In the interim period, it was decided, that the country would be run within the framework of 1964 constitution sans its provisions related to monarchy, legislative and executive bodies.

The Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was decided to help the Afghan Authority to establish its writ, constitute the state structure, and raise domestic security force to manage law and order situation of the country. All these measures, however, were superficial.

Choice of Karzai

Karzai was never the choice of participants of the Bonn Conference and, in fact, was nominated by the Americans. The former monarch, Zahir Shah, had nominated Sitar Seerat to lead the interim authority, but he was not accepted by the Americans. Karzai had three credentials: he was Pashtoon, he could speak English along with both national languages (Dari and Pashto), but most importantly his father, Abdul Ahad Karzai, even in King's time, was known for his connections with the Americans and had worked closely with Pakistani intelligence outfit, while in Pakistan, participating in the US sponsored jihad. His father was also granted a separate front during the jihad years and the weapons given to him were allegedly sold out to Baluchs inside Baluchistan.

Karzai proved to be a catastrophe; he patronized warlords and corruption. He protected the internationally proclaimed offenders of human rights and allegedly encouraged the dubious trafficking of drugs by his family members and brothers. He, alongside US ambassador, Zalmay Khalilzad, whipped up anti-Pakistan feelings by scapegoating it for all the mishaps. Karzai was weak and hence, was unable to assert his authority.

Loya Jirgas

In June 2002, an emergency Loya Jirga was held, which elected Karzai to head the Transitional Authority leading to elections. Among 15000 representatives, about 500 signed a written petition to the Loya Jirga in favour of the former King Zahir Shah to be their candidate for the new set up. However, under the American pressure, he was forced to

publicly declare his inability to be the candidate. Afterwards, he never met any American or British dignitary till his death. Though being Father of the Nation, he used to meet other westerners and foreigners sans of the mentioned two countries. Sidelining Zahir Shah and giving him just ceremonial position offended many of his supporters and enticed many of them to sell their properties in the country and take money back to the West for permanent settlement.

In January 2004, the new constitution of Afghanistan was passed by Loya Jirga and immediately ratified by the President. It envisaged a strong central Presidential form of government, stipulating bicameral legislature with Pashto and Dari as the two official languages of the State as against the previous constitutions which had arrogated national language status only to Pashto.

Security Forces

In accordance with the decisions of the Bonn Conference, Afghanistan needed a strong army and police. However, during the euphoric years, when the situation in Afghanistan was still fluid and Bush Administration resorted to the misadventure in Iraq, the general feeling among the International Community was that Afghanistan only needed police force. So after a long time, they reluctantly decided to train only seventy thousand national army until the year 2009. The thrust was on police but when the insurgency accentuated after 2005, NATO decided to accelerate the process of training of national army (not air force) and police. The number of the army soldiers was increased to 150000 – which now stand 350,000 on paper; this lack of knowledge about the ground realities substantiated profoundly to the world.

DDR and DIAG

Mainly funded by Japan along with UN and other donors, the Disarmament, Demobilization and Rehabilitation Programme was

started in April 2003 within the framework of Afghanistan's New Beginnings Programme. It was meant to disarm hundreds thousands of Mujahideen irregulars stuffed in the armed forces and police by the northern alliance (General Fahim). This was a big hassle as nobody wanted to go home and these groups were supported by the ruling Mujahideen coalition. Millions of dollars changed hands, further enriching the warlords and enhancing their influence. It was partial success as the formal security organs were a bit easier to demobilize and disband; about one hundred thirty thousand soldiers, criminals, kidnappers and warlords were demobilized in the process and some of them were formally inducted into the security forces of the country who were only interested in corruption.

In 2006, another Programme of Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG) was initiated aimed at collecting weapons from the myriad illegal groups. This Programme was very difficult to be implemented as these groups earned riches from these weapons, harassed the population to subservience, and provided gist to the mill of insurgency.

Iraq Debacle

Before consolidating Afghanistan, all the resources and military power of the Bush Administration were diverted to the unpopular war in Iraq, which not only militarily and economically proved a setback to Afghanistan but the stamp of legitimacy affixed on Afghan invasion was also soon removed causing a sharp drop in the moral high ground.

Elections

The appointment of Karzai in the first general election was a foregone conclusion, which was held in 2004 in accordance with the Bonn Agreement. All other candidates were obviously disadvantaged in the face of heavily supported Karzai.

The parliamentary elections held in September 2005 were a big

farce enacted by the international community, US especially, to create a façade of democracy. The candidates stuffed their ballot boxes in connivance of the UN staff. The farce could be easily identified from the episode that the results of the elections were announced on the internet and an acquaintance of mine belonging to EU highlighted how 60% women were shown to have participated in the polls in Paktia, while the women participation in Kabul was shown to be 27%; in reality, however, not a single woman had turned up in the polling station. In the end, all warlords were elected in the polls, thus further enhancing the rampant corruption in the society.

One cannot disagree with the assertion of the British national failed UN nominated representative, Paddy, that the main defect of the international community was choosing elections and giving impetus to the corruption in the countries concerned instead of establishing first rule of law. He was citing from his own stint in Bosnian crisis during which he was assigned the task to manage the affairs. At the behest of US, his appointment to become the head of United Nations Assistance Mission of Afghanistan (UNAMA) was turned down by Karzai.

So far every election has been a farce. The 2004 election, after the promulgation of constitution in which Karzai secured more than 53% votes, was also not up to the international mark. However the international community, rather the Americans, endorsed it. Afterwards, every presidential election is mired in malpractices and stuffing of ballot boxes and every single of them (2009 and 2014) has been labeled as rigged even by UNAMA and the Americans. The present dispensation is continuing beyond the limit of the term as stipulated in the constitution.

The election to the parliament is also mired in corruption and rigging where only warlords or their scions find an opportunity to be elected. Some independent candidates and women representatives, even if they do get elected, are left

with no option but to serve the corrupt system. The present parliament has outlived its stipulated time by more than two years, but the members are pleased as they continue enjoying perks and privileges. There are no fixed constituencies and every voter has to vote for the candidate of his choice among the numerous candidates in his own province. Many voters have registered themselves in more than one province and can vote twice or thrice in different provinces on the same day.

The last election of 2010 was held in Ghazni where Hazara are in minority and out of 18 districts only three are pure Hazara populated and three are with mixed ethnicities with Pakhtuns in majority. The rest of the provinces consists of pure Pakhtuns; but not a single Pakhtun returned to the parliament.

Corruption

Bribery, nepotism, cronyism, drug trafficking, and clientelism had been the hallmarks of Kabul Administration, as well as of the present Unity Government. Corruption is rampant in Afghanistan and linked with all those who were in one way or another associated with anti-Soviet Jihad. Putting Mujahedeen at the helm of affairs was clear signal that corruption would become norm of the day; that is why, all important police posts, border posts, custom posts, governors, sub-governors (*uluswals*) are being sold to the highest bidders while the bidding takes place in dollars. It is in my personal knowledge that provincial governor had to pay the Department Head of Interior Ministry to release his funds and that Department Head had to pay the Finance Ministry to release funds meant for the interior ministry.

Judiciary, police, and all the state organs dealing with people are fraudulent and the judiciary which is based on Islamic principles is corrupt to an extent where the Italians who were entrusted to modernize the judicial system were unable to find a clue to initiate it. Qazis sell their verdicts in open; son of the first Supreme Court Chief

Justice, Fazal Hadi Shinwari, was charging one thousand dollars for only one signature of his father. To get a favourable verdict, though unjust and illegal, one needs to bribe the court. Even the legal owners of the houses stood deprived of their houses despite having original ownership documents, because the opponents had made fake documents and had bribed the courts.

Karzai appointed his allies on important posts, totally disregarding merit. His example was followed by other ministers and high-ups. The body created for this purpose to appoint favorable people to various advertised posts, instead of encouraging merit. The same practice continues during the Unity Government of Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah.

Karzai's brothers were involved in dubious commercial practices by getting unlawful access to the public property. Karzai's brother, the assassinated Qayyum, was given about one thousand acres of state land in Kandahar for construction of a township on the nominal price of 600 dollars per acre, which he never paid off – he was able to resell plots for 30000 dollars per kanal without doing any development work on it. He charged hefty amount after construction of a house and his company was also given state-owned cement factories and mines on throwaway prices.

PRT

Provincial Reconstruction Teams were introduced headed by military personnel (not necessarily all Americans) in most of the provinces where civil and military staff and NGOs worked together to carry governance to the local levels, develop infrastructures, roads, schools, clinics, bridges in provinces with the support of local population. However, it was disbanded after 2011 when Karzai objected to this project as undermining the central government authority. PRT did develop certain projects, but failed in reaching their objectives; a school was to be built in the vicinity of Kabul and the

contract was given to a U.S Company with the name of Louis Berger for 400,000 dollars. The Company sub-contracted it to an Afghan Company for 150,000 dollars which it in return again sub-contracted it to another Afghan Company for 70,000 dollars.

The quality of school, to be built with such meager amount, was compromised.

Drug Trafficking

Most of the Mujahedeen were involved in drug trafficking even during the Soviet occupation as the Taliban successfully held onto poppy growth. After Karzai's ascendancy, the state actors started doing business with the connivance of their security forces and even international security forces were allegedly involved in this business during the initial period.

The links of Ahmad Wali Karzai, the de facto ruler of Kandahar, Gul Agha Sherzai, presently minister, Arif Noorzai, former minister and Deputy Speaker of the *Ulushi Jirga*, and others in the northern alliance with drug trafficking records, are well known to the world. They and others are all patronized from within the Kabul Administration. Initially the international community was either involved or did not take it seriously, but soon realized this business was fueling the insurgency and there was also pressure from Russia.

Lack of Coordination

There is not only lack of coordination with the international community and Afghan government, but also within the countries of European Union and the U.S. Even the Pentagon, Foreign Affairs, CIA (Special Forces) also suffer from lack of coordination and harmony, which has created problems in the fields of security and reconstruction.

After much clamor and cries, the U.S and international community, at last decided to appoint a tested hand on this

post (UNAMA's Representative) in 2007. But the appointment of Paddy Ashdown, who was not a non-serious person, was opposed by the Karzai Administration, which caused British unhappiness with the Afghan authorities. He was supposed to create much needed coordination between the International community and Afghan authority, within the international community, within the Afghan government, as well as between the reconstruction and security sides of the international assistance.

Collateral Damages to Civilians

The operations carried out against Taliban insurgents also results in losses inflicted upon the innocent civilians; this is another cause of discontent among civilian population providing new recruits to the insurgency. The warnings are mostly ill-motivated directed against the real or imagined opponents of the Afghan intelligence providers, which invite retaliation on the part of international forces targeting wrong objects and people.

Light-footed Presence

Obama's surge in the US troops in Afghanistan was an open admission on the part of international community that the policy initially envisaged by them and named as the 'light-footed presence' of the forces by the UN Representative, Lakhdar Brahimi, was absolutely wrong. The same can be said about the prescription of Afghan Ownership which has landed Afghanistan into the preset quagmire by giving free hand to corrupt Kabul regime and its supporters. Turning down the stewardship of Paddy Ashdown, who was out to rectify the situation, was another baggage added to the heap of misfortune. Afterwards they saw the heavy-footed presence as a cure. The surge also failed and Obama declared to withdraw from Afghanistan in 2016 – which could not be materialized. Afghanistan is a hard country and none of international actors can fully comprehend it.

Americans have all along been changing its military strategy in Afghanistan. From ISAF based only in Kabul during the euphoria of victory, increase in the NATO forces, the Resolute Support Force, to the present troops' withdrawal issue, signifies the flawed US-NATO strategy and the ignorance of Afghan reality and ethos, as well as underestimation of opponents.

Political Parties

Law was enacted that Afghanistan should be a multi-party democracy. The current law was promulgated in 2009, while previously there was also a similar law after the enactment of constitution in 2003. Until now, about a hundred parties have registered themselves with the ministry of Justice. According to the requirements to register a party, it must have 10,000 members – while previously it used to be 700 members for the registration. Most of these parties are 'paper parties' with members not loyal to the party. Its members can be co-opted for any post disregarding the consent of the party; this is just to portray Afghanistan as a multi-party system. However, there are some parties which have fixed agenda and continue politicking upon their political and ideological plank.

International Conferences

More than a dozen of international conferences have been held in various capitals of the West and Japan, in order to commit more finances to Afghanistan, boost the image and working of Kabul regime, entice it for reforms to improve governance and eliminate corruption. However, almost all failed to achieve the ultimate objectives. Neither the international community fulfilled all the promises, nor did the Kabul regime improve its performance; rather they reinforced the failure and grabbed more dollars.

The latest conference was held in 2018 in Geneva, the goal of which was to show the solidarity of the international

community with the Afghan people, the government in their efforts for peace and prosperity, and for the Afghan government to renew its commitment to development and reform. This was a crucial moment for the government and international community to demonstrate progress and commitment, and to maintain the momentum for elections and opportunities for peace.

The conference was also an opportunity to emphasize the importance of the development and reform agenda and the need to advance it as a constructive contribution to peace and security. This particular conference was also crucial in measuring results against the \$15.2 billion committed by the international community for Afghanistan in 2016.

Unity Government

As mentioned earlier that every election in Afghanistan, barring 2004, is considered rigged even by international community, and the last Presidential election held in 2014 was no exception. The Afghan National [Unity Government](#) was established in June 2014 by John Kerry, US foreign secretary, as both candidates blamed each other of rigging and did not agree to accept the results; this was an arrangement derived out of the Afghan constitution. After a notorious and controversial 2014 presidential election, Ashraf Ghani, the president of Afghanistan agreed to split the power with Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, Chief Executive of Afghanistan. Agreement over the presidency of Ashraf Ghani and the appointment of Abdullah Abdullah, as Chief Executive, ended the political deadlock that otherwise would have caused a political collapse in Afghanistan.

The lifespan of the Afghan National Unity Government has already approached to its end legally. [During these years in office, President Ghani and Chief Executive](#), Dr. Abdullah had made many promises to the people. The most important ones were holding Loy Jira for Amendment of Constitutional Law, issuing

the electronic ID Cards, reforming the election body and many more other promises. But none of these promises were fulfilled, and on the contrary, the security worsened, and poverty and unemployment also increased over the past four years.

Women Status

As a whole, the status of women in Afghan society has witnessed a profound change and now they are represented in every walk of life which was unconceivable during the Taliban regime and even before that, during the misrule of Mujahedeen after the fall of Najibullah regime. Despite all the problems, unfulfilled commitments and promises, and other paradoxical political statements issued by the Afghan National Unity Government for reforms in Afghanistan, the Afghan National Unity Government is worthy of being praised and admired for providing opportunities for Afghan women and girls to demonstrate their potentials – to prove that they are not weaker than men. They can play a constructive role in the economic, social, educational, and political aspects if given the chance. They can prove that gender does not determine someone's talent, capacity, and competences. They can be the winners, too, in any kind of competition and under any kind of circumstances as long as the processes are meritocratic and transparent.

On many instances, numerous opportunities are provided by the Afghan government political positions during the National Unity Government either via competitive recruitment processes or through Afghanistan's president's directives.

The gender inequality is deeply rooted in the cultural norms and the values of the Afghan society. So as to fight and challenge these rigid and male dominated cultural norms, the government of Afghanistan, and very particularly the educational sectors of Afghanistan should begin fighting with gender inequality within schools as children learn such

cultural norms at schools and later embody them when they enter the society as civil servants and officers at schools.

Withdrawal Scenario

President Trump during his election campaign promised to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. However, after assuming power he came under the influence of his Generals in Pentagon who wanted some more troops and extension in time. Their demand was granted, but after sometimes the situation in Afghanistan worsened. So, Trump decided to pack to the displeasure of his Generals and to the frustration of US allies in Afghanistan. The dollar corrupt mafia who enjoyed US patronage for long has panicked; most of them have stashed their ill-gotten money in foreign countries, but some of them have invested within Afghanistan by building high rising buildings, plazas, landed estates, small scale food industry, immovable property and posh houses. They are in danger.

The gains made during all these years of occupation have tremendously improved the education sector where millions of children, including girls, are getting education, health facilities have propped up, infrastructure development has taken place, improvement in agricultural sector have gained momentum. All these gains are in jeopardy if Taliban ascend to power. Until now Taliban are interested only in the external aspect of agreement with US, i.e., withdrawal of US troops and the promise not to use Afghan territory against any country in future. They argue that intra-Afghan dialogue and ceasefire is for the Afghans to decide without foreign interference. They detest Kabul government and consider it a U.S puppet, and they are prepared to sign ceasefire with Americans but not with the Kabul government as they know that their strength lies in their arms and war. However, we hope for the better as another spate of civil war without US troops would spell disaster to the region, especially to Pakistan.