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Research Report

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A Change of Paradigm in Afghanistan

Afghan Government Ownership Instead of Donor Priorities

Citha D. Maass

At the Afghanistan conference taking place in Paris in mid-June some delegates facing forthcoming elections at home may use the occasion to counter widespread voters' criticism of international operations in Afghanistan. President Karzai, who is also involved in the preliminary phase of an election campaign, will call for a change of paradigm in order to rid himself of his reputation as a "puppet of the donor countries". Citing two new strategy papers for the period up to 2013, he has advocated "government ownership". It seems logical, given the increased confidence of leading Afghan elites on the one hand and the task of adjusting international stabilisation targets on the other, for political responsibility to be gradually handed over to the Afghan government by 2013. The time remaining until the final handover should be used intensively to build up the capacity of Afghan partners, above all the army.

On 12 June 2008 French President Nicolas Sarkozy will open the International Conference in Support of Afghanistan in Paris in the presence of leading international politicians and representatives from more than eighty nations. Given the difficult situation in Afghanistan, politicians will have to make a convincing political case for continuing international operations in Afghanistan if they are to put pay to widespread scepticism in many donor nations. The delegates will thus try to use the media exposure offered by the conference to mobilise support for their cause, emphasising unanimously that the rebuilding of Afghanistan requires a continuing international commitment. Some donors will back up their stated convictions with new

promises of financial support. Other prominent delegates, such as George W. Bush and Angela Merkel may, for election purposes, seek to emphasise what has already been achieved, even if those achievements are still rather fragile.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who began his preliminary election campaign at the end of 2007, is expected to strike a new note at the conference. In fact the international public is scarcely aware that an election campaign has begun in Afghanistan, for it is generally believed that the fundamental conditions for credible and transparent elections do not currently exist. There are fears that the poor security situation will prevent elections being held in some parts of the country and will con-

strain the sending of international observers. This would undermine the legitimacy of whoever wins the election. Finally, the dispute between Karzai and his domestic opponents that has been going on since spring 2007 about when and under what conditions the presidential, parliamentary and provincial council elections should be held has yet to be settled. Therefore President Karzai will be trying in Paris to allay international and domestic reservations by using a strategy aimed at bringing about a change of paradigm in Afghanistan.

New Strategy Papers

The new approach is based on two planning documents prepared by the technocrats in Karzai's government in collaboration with the World Bank: the *Afghanistan National Development Strategy* (ANDS) and the *Five Year Strategic Workplan of the Independent Directorate of Local Governance* (IDLG).

Karzai signed the ANDS on 21 April 2008 well ahead of the Paris conference. It builds on the *Afghanistan Compact* document approved by the London Afghanistan Conference in January 2006 and replaces the former interim-ANDS. The ANDS remains committed to the liberal peace thesis that has determined international engagement in Afghanistan since the Bonn Agreement of December 2001. This assumes that democracy and a free market economy promote internal political peace. It is thus in accord with the main principles of the *Agenda for Peace* proclaimed by former UN Secretary General Boutros-Ghali in 1992, which since then has served as the guiding principle for new UN peace missions. Accordingly, the ANDS perceives its strategic goal as being "to enable the private sector to lead Afghanistan's development within a competitive market-based economy".

Like *Afghanistan Compact*, the ANDS is divided into three sections covering different areas: (1) security; (2) governance, the rule of law and human rights; and (3) economic and social development. It also

addresses the most important cross-cutting issue of *Afghanistan Compact*: namely, eliminating the narcotics industry. In a process set to take place over a period of five years (2008–2013) the economy is to be given a rapid boost in order to generate income and thus reduce poverty, improve living conditions and create a basis for security and stability. In the longer term the UN's "millennium development goals" are to be adapted to conditions in Afghanistan. These envisage Afghanistan becoming "a stable Islamic constitutional democracy at peace with itself and its neighbors" by 2020.

The second document, the *Five Year Strategic Workplan* of the IDLG, was published in February 2008 and, like the ANDS, covers the period 2008–2013. The IDLG was established per decree by President Karzai on 30 August 2007 and through a further decree issued on 8 May 2008 given the task of developing a *Sub-national governance policy*. The IDLG is expected to "improve governance and achieve stability, security and development". Specifically, administrative structures are to be put in place at the provincial and local level in order to remedy a key weakness of the national government—namely, that apart from the capital Kabul and the capitals of a few other provinces, Karzai has been able to exercise his authority in only a limited way over the rest of the territory of Afghanistan. In some provinces he has been forced to make concessions to strong regional power-brokers or else had to refrain from deploying state security forces in these areas because of resistance from rebel groups led by the neo-Taliban. The IDLG has also been given the task of tackling corruption and inefficiency among government representatives sent by Karzai. The directorate will be given the power to appoint provincial and district governors and provincial and city council bodies and will be supported in this endeavour by the *Afghanistan Sub-national Governance Project* (ASGP) founded specially for this purpose by the UNDP.

The significance of the IDLG becomes clear if one looks at the political and

administrative structure of the Afghan state. The presidential system, which is organised along what by international standards are highly centralised lines, is anchored in the constitution of January 2004. The president is empowered by the constitution to appoint government representatives right down to district level. Such far-reaching executive powers must be balanced by a correspondingly strong legislature in order to check corruption or abuse of office. But in Afghanistan political control through elected local representatives has not been established. For political, organisational and financial reasons it will not be possible to hold party-based local elections in the near future. Nor, indeed, do the provincial councils elected in 2005 have sufficient rights or the necessary political weight to exercise this kind of control. Although the IDLG stipulates that the new bodies should be elected every three years, the political structures required to ensure free elections are lacking. In addition, unless there is a clear delineation of powers, the new bodies will be seen as rivals to existing institutions like the provincial councils and the village councils set up under the *National Solidarity Programme*. Therefore it is suspected that Karzai has created the IDLG, whose director-general Jailani Popal is loyal to the president, as an instrument for extending his influence deep into the provinces—and this in the run-up to the elections.

A Change of Paradigm: Afghan Ownership

Karzai's strategy for Paris and later for the Afghan election campaign represents a change of paradigm that may be summarised using a quotation from the ANDS: "ensure ownership by the government". Until now the priorities and national interests of donor nations have de facto determined Afghanistan's development strategy, even if this order of precedence was disguised by statements that paid lip service to "Afghan ownership". Inter-

national donors currently finance 90 per cent of the Afghan government's annual budget, and although Karzai is continuing to ask for subsidies, he would also like to free his country from its political dependence. The ANDS and the IDLG are designed to put him in a position to be able to decide himself along what principles Afghanistan is governed. In order to rid himself of his image as a "puppet of the donor nations", Karzai is therefore demanding "government ownership". He justifies his claim to leadership by saying he represents the interests of the Afghan population and uses arguments from the ANDS and the IDLG work plan to support this position.

Although the ANDS and the IDLG were drafted by technocrats and follow the model of a "liberal market democracy", they are presented as the product of an Afghan *bottom-up* participatory process. In Chapter 2 of the ANDS ("the participatory process and provincial development plans"), the comprehensive consultation process used to prepare the strategy document is described in detail. According to the ANDS, the process has taken place over the past three years in all thirty-four provinces and in all important institutions and organisations. More than 17,000 people, 47 per cent of them women, are said to have been involved—a rather surprising statement given the critical security situation in some provinces! It goes on to say that the development priorities outlined in the ANDS are to be implemented in order "to seed the emergence of a *grass roots democracy*". The IDLG also emphasises that it will encourage "public participation in decision making". These ambitious goals can only be achieved if the Karzai government has sufficient authority, and the IDLG is to help endow it with such authority. For this reason Karzai will be asking the international community in Paris to support the IDLG politically and financially.

Electoral Procedures

Doubts about the Karzai government's promise to encourage political participa-

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tion are, however, being fuelled by the procedures for the forthcoming ballot, the first details of which became public in March 2008. Karzai has announced that he will be running as a candidate for the presidential elections expected to take place in September 2009; this time the elections of the provincial councils are to be held parallel to the presidential elections. Nevertheless, the registration of the more than two million new voters planned for August 2008 has been further delayed. The date for the parliamentary elections is still the subject of controversy, but currently they are expected to be held in early summer 2010. What has been decided is that the parliamentary elections will once again employ a rarely used voting system, the so-called *Single Non-Transferable Vote* (SNTV), which is tantamount to a personality contest in which voters elect an individual rather than a party. While this system favours supposedly “independent” candidates, it also weakens political parties, which will be unable to openly mobilise voters. Instead, the latter remain caught up in the clientele system created by local warlords. This means that the new parliament will be weakened because no viable party-based factions will be able to be formed.

The Gradual Hand-over of Responsibility by 2013

The ANDS and the IDLG claim to be committed to the long-term goal of a “liberal market democracy”, yet the SNTV electoral system limits broad popular participation. In addition, the consultation process cited by the two strategy papers is probably largely a sham.

During this difficult transition phase the purpose of the Paris Conference was to make a sober provisional appraisal of the situation. On the positive side, international efforts have resulted in progress in, for example, the health and education sectors, in improvements in the infrastructure and in building up the Afghan army (ANA). Another, newly emerging factor is

that the Karzai government and the re-strengthened political elites in Afghanistan have now become so self-assertive that they are demanding political responsibility.

At the same time the profound structural weaknesses in all of the three areas covered by *Afghanistan Compact* require a re-examination of the stabilisation strategy employed to date. This should be based on three premises:

- ▶ Targets should be lowered to a more realistic level and reforms adapted to prevailing conditions, which are determined by Afghan values.
- ▶ Given the new confidence of the Karzai government and the Afghan elites, the international community should expect to hand over political responsibility by the time the ANDS and IDLG processes are concluded in 2013. When Karzai speaks of “government ownership” rather than “Afghan ownership” this implies that he is aiming to achieve Afghan-style rule in which political parties play no formal role.
- ▶ Finally, the international community should conceive an exit strategy that focuses mainly on expanding the capacity of its Afghan partners. A main priority should be to push ahead with training the army by 2013, since it is proving to be a positive force in the development of national integrity.