

## War, Elections and the Real Measure of Success in Afghanistan

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The national parliamentary elections that recently took place in Afghanistan on 18 September offer Canadians a useful and timely reason to think critically about our own, self-imposed deadline of July 2011 for the withdrawal of Canadian troops from that war-weary state. After a decade of commitment first to the ousting of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda, and subsequently to the defeat of the Taliban and the protection and promotion of democratic government and human rights for all Afghans, what lies in store for Canadians as we review and debate our national role, our sacrifice of Canadian lives, and our investment of money, materiel and political credibility in Afghanistan?

Earlier this year I was fortunate to have the opportunity to travel to Kandahar City and to Kabul, as part of a 'Familiarization Visit' arranged by the Department of National Defence. Before offering any other comments, I should take this chance to say thanks to all of those men and women who helped to organize and to conduct the visit, and to those Canadian soldiers and Canadian and Afghan security personnel who escorted me, protected me when necessary, and allowed me to look into their lives both inside and outside the wire. And I should note, without giving their names here, that I was pleased to meet two of my former Laurier students, one now working with Foreign Affairs and the other with the Canadian International Development Agency, both living and working with other Canadians and Afghans in the vicinity of Kandahar City.

### The Real Measure of Success? Achieving "Afghan good-enough"

The phrase "Afghan good-enough" is not my own. However, I also cannot attribute it to any one particular individual, for at least two reasons. First, and unfortunately, the present Conservative government in Ottawa has placed such tight controls on whatever its public servants can (and cannot) say, that none will speak 'on the record' and few even will speak candidly off the record either. To do so can be career limiting, at best. When Canadian troops are fighting and, less often but still too often, being killed or injured in Afghanistan for the publicly stated goals of promoting democracy, human rights and security in that beleaguered country, such strictures on open discussion and therefore on informed public debate provide a poor example of Canadian political leadership. Second, during my participation in the DND-organized 'Familiarization Visit' to Afghanistan in January 2010, the phrase was heard so often, and was used by Canadian as well as non-Canadian (Afghan, American, British, Dutch, and others) sources - civilian and military, government and nongovernment - that its origin is not at all clear. It is, however, a commonplace within the western military forces and other political and diplomatic representatives.

There were a variety of opinions on exactly what “Afghan good-enough” means in detailed policy terms, but a few central ideas could be identified. It means Canada – and the NATO ISAF mission of which Canada’s engagement is a part – supporting, and helping to create the time and space for the development of, forms of Afghan-led governance especially at the district level that could be described as “functionally corrupt”. In particular, this means an Afghan governance structure and/or system - presumably one that is friendly to, or at least not hostile towards, Western interests and values - that could deliver at least basic and essential services to its populace: a good level of security from the threat of attack by Taliban and other antigovernment elements, reliable power and water for sanitation and daily use, at least basic health care and open access to education for both genders in safety, access to the rule of law through the court system and a police force that protects rather than preys on citizens, improved border controls (military and customs services), and economic development and reconstruction.

Unfortunately, these same opinions also observed that the central Afghan governmental institutions are either dysfunctional or invisible at the district level and show little prospect of improving in the near or medium term future – which is as much as the Canadian and NATO forces appear to have available to them. According to a recent report by the Institute for the Study of War, “the problem in Kandahar is that the population views government institutions as predatory and illegitimate,” representing the interests of warlords and powerbrokers rather than those of the populace. As a result, the Western powers that have supported and financed the Karzai regime, and whose militaries essentially have kept him in power and preserved his security – such as it is – also are tainted by this association in the eyes of many ordinary Afghans. It may be true that Karzai is the duly elected leader of Afghanistan and that for practical and pragmatic reasons we therefore must work with him, rather than spend our energies criticizing his government. Saying that, however, does not make his government any more effective or credible amongst Afghans outside of Kabul.

From a narrowly Canadian perspective, this means that the single biggest threat to ‘mission success’ at the time of the CF’s intended withdrawal in mid 2011 is not going to be the attacks of the Taliban or other insurgent forces; it will be the inability of the CF or the US-led forces to turn over the governance of Kandahar Province (KP) and Kandahar City (KC) to a capable and constitutional government body that is respected by the Afghan population that it must seek to govern. An important caveat to that already dire-sounding prospect also needs to be made clear: whatever the CF does, and whatever it can accomplish, in KP and KC by the end of 2011, will not bring the conflict against the Taliban (Afghan Taliban or Pakistani Taliban), other insurgent and anti-government groups, or the now often forgotten Al Qaeda in Afghanistan to a successful conclusion by 2011, or 2014, or 2020. That can come only through success in delivering demonstrable political and economic progress in addition to military security and improved rule of law; it will have to come for all of Afghanistan, not just through KP and KC; and it will involve

all of the interested regional – most especially Pakistan, India and Iran – and international state actors, and several non-state actors. Military success against the Taliban in KP and KC, but failure elsewhere and in other components, still will lead to overall failure. Recognizing this possibility is not being alarmist or defeatist; it simply is to recognize clearly and realistically the range of problems that must be confronted if they are to have any chance of being addressed.

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Ignoring these challenges is not a viable option but a recipe for failure. If real progress, recognized by and meaningful to the general population of Afghanistan, is not achieved and Canadian (and later, British and American) forces depart, the Western newspaper headlines in 2012, or 2015, will read “Taliban re-capture Kandahar City” (as if the Taliban ever left Kandahar City!) and then “Kabul falls to the Taliban”. The current situation indicates the scale of the challenge: a 2010 *Washington Post* report cited a US Department of Defense assessment of 121 districts that the DoD considered as being critical to stabilize and control in order to ‘win’ (whatever that means) the war in Afghanistan. Of these 121, the study concluded that 29 districts were ‘sympathetic’ to the incumbent Karzi government in Kabul; 48 were supporters of, or sympathetic to, the Taliban; and the remaining 44 were up for grabs, being currently either under local warlord rule, controlled by other groups opposed to the Karzai government or to any central government, or else essentially ungoverned by any district-level power base. Shadow Taliban governors, according to some reports, currently exist in 33 of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces.

The challenge then is to maintain and to reinforce the sympathies of the existing 29 supportive districts; to defeat and to remove support for the Taliban in 48 others; and in those 48 as well as the additional 44 then to replace Taliban, warlord and other power bases while building local support for and confidence in district level political and security representatives of the Karzai government, as well as local acceptance of the presence of NATO forces. The Afghan National Army (ANA) has improved significantly in quality as well as in numbers under Canadian – through the Operational Mentoring and Liaison team, or OMLT - and other ISAF nations’ military and civilian mentorship and partnership. Still, it functions well only at local levels and is far away from being able to gather intelligence, or to plan and coordinate and conduct operations at provincial or national levels. The Afghan National Police (ANP) remains the poor cousin of the ANA, under equipped and under trained, with an “attrition rate” (i.e. ANP killed in the line of duty) some 300 per cent higher than that of the ANA. I met some excellent ANP officers during my visit, thoughtful and dedicated to their profession and to their country. As both they and their Canadian counterparts recognized, however, the vast majority of recruits to the ANP are illiterate young men, who have been pushed to look towards the ANP as they have no other employment opportunities available to them elsewhere.

Of course, all of this progress also has to happen against a dynamic background of counter efforts by Taliban, warlord and insurgent forces, all aware of the 2011 timeline for Canadians and the 2014 timeline for other ISAF members. The

alternative to winning popular Afghan support for the Karzai regime and NATO will be growing local support for, or at minimum reluctant acceptance of, Taliban and local warlord rule.