

# Searching for an exit strategy

The Afghanistan donor conference in Paris marked the beginning of a paradigm shift | By Citha Maass

The international community is finally ready to transfer more responsibility for reconstruction to Afghans – as it must if it wants to start withdrawing its soldiers from the country in 2013. But that means accepting Afghan-style government.

The International Conference in Support of Afghanistan, which took place in Paris on June 12, was disappointing in one important respect: It did not draw any honest interim conclusions about the sluggish rate of reconstruction, growing corruption and the setbacks to implementing peace.

Still, one welcome development is that the conference signaled the start of a clear paradigm shift. In the future, the priorities of the Afghan government and not those of the international donors are to determine the reconstruction strategy in Afghanistan. Afghan president Hamid Karzai insisted on the change with reference to the new Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS), due to be implemented between 2008 and 2013. He presented the plan as an “Afghan-owned blueprint” for the development of Afghanistan and as a national Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP).

The international donors agreed with Karzai and emphasized the “Afghan ownership” of the ANDS process. They also promised about €14 billion in aid for the next five years.



Needed for some time to come: German soldiers patrolling in Kabul.

Since Karzai faces a reelection battle next year, he can now point to his ownership of the ANDS process and thereby rebut the accusation of being a puppet of the West. Karzai also received promises that the international community will support the conduct of the 2009 presidential and provincial council elections as well as the parliamentary elections in 2010. Moreover, he should also benefit from international support for the five-year work plan (from 2008 to 2013) of the recently established Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG). Set up in August 2007, it is to strengthen state institutions at the national and sub-national levels and establish civil service capacity on a larger scale.

Karzai's election prospects will benefit from this program, which is headed by one of his most loyal supporters, Jailani Popal. It enables Karzai to coun-

ter complaints about his bad governance – complaints that have been growing steadily both at home and abroad.

In the latest opinion polls in Afghanistan, a majority complained that corruption during Karzai's period in office was worse than during any other regime since the end of the 1970s. Another reason for Karzai's declining legitimacy is that his government's writ simply does not run in some provinces because of resistance from insurgent groups under the leadership of the neo-Taliban. And in other provinces, Karzai has been forced to compromise with strong regional leaders. He is hoping to overcome these deficits with the help of the IDLG.

In principle, this project is contributing to the stability of Afghanistan. But some observers have already pointed out the risk of destabilizing consequences. There are concerns, for

instance, that the IDLG could be secretly manipulated for election campaign purposes, as Popal might staff the new sub-national institutions with Karzai loyalists only. Overall, some 10,000 positions are to be created throughout the country, jobs that could be filled by people who promise to work toward Karzai's reelection.

These concerns must be taken seriously because there are no efficient checks and balances by elected representatives of the people in Afghanistan's extremely centralized government system. Local elections have never taken place. The provincial councils elected in 2005 are politically weak and possess no rights. The 2005 parliamentary elections took place under a unique electoral system, in which not party representatives but “independent” candidates were elected.

The 2010 parliamentary elections already look likely to take place under the same system. That would weaken the new parliament because it prevents the establishment of strong parliamentary groups organized along party lines. Instead, it becomes easier to buy off individual lawmakers ahead of a parliamentary vote so that Karzai does not need to fear any strong supervision from the legislative branch.

What consequences should the international community draw from this? The paradigm shift is a move in the right direction because it strengthens the ownership of the Afghan government and can induce the withdrawal of ISAF starting in 2013. The international community should use the five-year period of the

ANDS to empower the government, the state institutions, and the parliament to assume political responsibility. Efforts should be redoubled to move forward the build-up of the Afghan National Army (ANA), which is developing into a nationally integrated security force.

The most important thing, however, is to strengthen reform forces in every sector: civil society, political parties, but also traditional tribal bodies and those sections of the Ulema that represent moderate Islam. The extremely centralized nature of the Afghan government system makes strong political supervision all the more important.

But the international community must also be realistic. If international troops were to withdraw too soon, opponents of reform would immediately massacre the democratic forces in a bloody act of revenge. It is crucial, therefore, to establish sufficient democratic potential before the military withdrawal begins. On the other hand, the international military presence should be reduced soon after 2013 because the Afghan population is drawing increasingly on its historical experience of driving foreign troops from their country. Afghan ownership will inevitably mean accepting Afghan-style government based on Afghan cultural values.

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