



From 7,000 Miles Away, Afghans Anxiously Watch U.S. Presidential Election

Don Duncan | Thursday, May 29, 2008

MAZAR-E-SHARIF, Afghanistan -- As the United States prepares for its presidential election, many Afghans are anxiously watching the race that will bring an end to the administration that triggered the 2001 U.S. intervention in their country and that has designed much of the continued military and development strategy there.



Given that Afghanistan, one of the poorest countries in the world, has become almost completely dependent on the foreign assistance the U.S. intervention has brought, Afghans perhaps have good reason for their anxiety.

"The important issues to Afghans are Afghanistan -- and Pakistan," said 29 year-old Roya Aziz, an Afghan-American filmmaker who moved back to Kabul from California in 2005. "Afghans want a president who will lead the international community in maintaining its political will and aid assistance in rebuilding Afghanistan, and someone who will take a hard line towards the Pakistani regime because insurgents are enjoying logistical, moral and financial support from elements within Pakistan."

Today, in a sense, there are two Afghanistans and two kinds of aid that are propping the country up: Military aid to the Afghanistan still at war, to the south and particularly along the porous border with Pakistan; and development aid to the Afghanistan at peace, where stability is taking hold.

The city of Mazar-e-Sharif, the first Afghan city to fall to the Northern Alliance, is an example of the latter. Since 2001, the city and region has experienced relative security and development progress on the ground is tangible -- new roads, improved sewage systems, more schooling for girls, and a burgeoning private media sector.

"America is a part of Afghanistan and Afghanistan is part of America," said Shoib Najafizada, 25, a journalist who works for Western media outlets covering the Mazar e Sharif area. "We don't follow the Chinese election and we don't know who the new Russian president is because we don't care."

"Many people feel as if our own president is being elected because whatever the president of the U.S. wants the president of Afghanistan [Hamid Karzai] will do," he said. "I sometimes wonder why America doesn't install voting booths in Afghanistan so that we can vote too!"

The cardinal issue for Najafizada's is the maintenance of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. He has no allegiance to Democrats or Republicans but is simply behind the candidate that will keep the U.S. in Afghanistan the longest.

Talk on the campaign trail by Democratic candidates Clinton and Obama of pulling out of Iraq gives some Afghans the jitters. Others believe it would be a positive step for their country.

Hassas Khyber, 28, a doctor who works for the Japanese International Cooperation Agency, believes that a drawdown of troops in Iraq would be good for Afghanistan. "Most Afghans now think that since the surge [of U.S. troops to Iraq in 2007], attention has decreased in Afghanistan . . . so therefore pulling out of Iraq might be good for Afghanistan."

"Whoever wins the election should not leave Afghanistan in the cold as they did with the *mujahideen* in the 90s," he said, referring to the United States' 1989 withdrawal of support for the Afghan resistance after the Soviet Union retreated from the country. Many blame the security vacuum that ensued for the rise of the Taliban.

"We are not in condition to do this job without the international community. If a new president comes and decides to isolate the [U.S.], this will create a problem. If you leave us alone once again, we will face the music again," said Khyber.

While some believe a drawdown in Iraq would be a positive for Afghanistan under a new president, others, like Kabul-based tour operator Muqim Jamshady, 28, believe such a policy would be a disaster.

"If you pull out of Iraq, all the terrorists will be strengthened there and this may bolster terrorism in Afghanistan in the future," Jamshady said. Afghanistan already has trouble containing the movement of Taliban and al-Qaida agents across its border with Pakistan, he said, and the last thing his country needs is another well of insurgency in Iraq.

"It's like a virus in the body -- a disease," Jamshady said of the insurgency. "If you don't get enough antibiotics, the disease can take over the body. We need to figure out how much aid we need now for the situation here and react fast."

There is a popular perception here that U.S. interventionism is exactly what Afghanistan needs to continue its path toward peace and regaining sovereignty over its entire territory. For this reason, many Afghans are suspicious of the Democratic candidates and voice support for McCain and the

Republicans. Overshadowed by the divisive issue of Iraq, however, Afghanistan has been conspicuously absent from campaign debates about foreign policy.

"There is some perception that a Democratic president will not be as involved as the Bush administration," said Roya Aziz. "[But] many pundits also believe that regardless of which party wins the elections, the U.S. will not abandon [Afghanistan] because of the fear of international terrorism."

Whichever U.S. presidential candidate Afghans support from 7,000 miles away, the same message comes through loud and clear: America is important for Afghanistan.

But Afghanistan, in the neighborhood of ascendant powers Iran, China and Russia, and contiguous with America's key yet fragile ally Pakistan, is also hugely important for America. The magnitude of the U.S. commitment in Afghanistan bears this truth out: 33,000 U.S. troops are active in Afghanistan, and a request for 7,000 more is wending its way through Congress. The United States since 2001 has spent a total of about \$140 billion on Afghanistan, including development and war funding, and will spend \$23 billion more in fiscal year 2008, according to an April 11, 2008, report (<http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL33110.pdf>) (<http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL33110.pdf>) of the Congressional Research Service.

A total of \$24 billion has been pledged by foreign donors to Afghanistan in several donor conferences since 2002, although only \$15 billion has been thus far delivered, according to aid agencies.

French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner recently said that those aid efforts to Afghanistan had not yet "fully yielded fruit."

"We must review our tools and approach," he said recently in a meeting with humanitarian organizations in Paris.

Next month, at a conference in the French capital, Afghanistan will ask international donors for a further \$50 billion.

Don Duncan traveled to Afghanistan with the support of the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting (<http://www.pulitzercenter.org>) (<http://www.pulitzercenter.org>).