

Analysis

Bush's unwelcome gift to NATO: Afghanistan

By Ben Tanosborn

Online Journal Guest Writer

September 27, 2005 (tanosborn.com)—My good friend Mingo, a chronicler of Afghanistan and diligent contributor to European and Latin American print and electronic media, found himself as a self-appointed, unofficial observer in the September 18 provincial and parliamentary elections of Afghanistan.

Of all places, he chose Ghoryan, a village almost two dusty hours by jeep from Herat—his most recent home base, where there's a NATO/ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) military installation.

Four days after the election, when I was able to connect with him, his experience did not seem to echo anything I had either read or heard. Not that I expected it to be so. The story we did get from the corporate media, passed no doubt through the "optimistic filter" of the White House, gave a communiqué portraying unquestionable success "for democracy" in a liberated Afghanistan . . . even if only a third of the registered voters in Greater Kabul went to the polls, with just over 50 percent doing so nationwide (vs. 70 percent recorded a year ago in the presidential election).

It was quite a different story in Ghoryan, according to Mingo, where at day's end fewer than 30 percent of registered voters, according to local officials, had made it to the polls. (His fluency in both Dari and Pashto, after a long stay in Afghanistan, has bypassed the need for both interpreters and often-given "interpretations," as he puts it.) Why such a low turnout? And, was it representative of other rural areas?

Mingo preferred not to speculate on the turnout elsewhere, but was quick to advance the principal reasons for the obvious disillusionment he had seen grow and come to a crescendo after the election of Hamid Karzai last fall. People's expectations are seldom, if ever, met . . . but in Afghanistan, accomplishments had fallen dismally short.

Economically, most Afghans see neither an improvement in their personal lot, or view the rebuilding of their country happening at an acceptable pace. Politically, many are angry at having warlords and militia commanders appear on the ballot . . . making them conclude that democracy simply legitimizes old tyrants, those who already hold power. And, as for security . . . people feel insecure, often intimidated, with four factions bidding for power: Americans, the Taliban, warlords/drug lords, and Karzai's government.

It doesn't take long after talking to someone with intimate, and in situ, knowledge of what's going on in Afghanistan to realize the mirages shown to Americans "as proof" of economic and political success in the democratic upbringing of that nation. Yet, for the many mirages we are shown, an oasis appears now and then that gives a glimmer of hope. In this instance, right there in Ghoryan, Mingo told me of such success: an FM radio station, Nadaye Suhl (Voice of Peace), part of a large national network funded by USAID (United States Agency for International Development)—stations experiencing different levels of success in their double mission of community service and commercial enterprise. (This USAID success is a novelty for me, after all my first-hand involvement in failure after failure by that agency during the '70s.)

Bush and Rumsfeld probably reached the conclusion long ago, perhaps late in 2003, that no additional help would be forthcoming from NATO or anybody else to help hold the fort in Iraq. And that the Iraqi

insurgency would be formidable enough to keep US ground forces in check . . . leaving the Pentagon with only sea and air destructive potential, but not enough foot soldiers (to invade and occupy other lands). “Expeditions” to Syria or Iran could only take place on the saddle of cruise missiles. And the problem could escalate beyond the exchange of words with Syria and Iran . . . it could conceivably involve a re-emerging Taliban, and an Afghan insurgency at par with that in Iraq. Next spring perhaps?

Now the Bush administration is being pressured on several issues by Karzai, who probably feels his only chance for remaining in power rests on some form of internal alliance, and not an overt dependence on a foreign military. A military more Afghans are coming to believe, rightly or wrongly, that contributes to insecurity . . . best exemplified by irresponsible “collateral” damage, killing of civilians, in its pursuit of the Taliban.

So the pressure has been on to get troops from “Old Europe” (that would have none of Iraq) to play a larger role in keeping the peace, or even assume total responsibility, in Afghanistan. The voice from the White House seems to be amplifying with the passage of time, making it more than a wish, and sounding more like a demand for NATO to play the “top” operational role there. But diplomatically (and respectfully), the Europeans prefer to simulate deafness and look the other way . . . remembering Seneca’s warning: “Unwelcome is the gift which is held long in the hand.” For two years now they have seen Bush trying to pass the Afghan-buck to them . . . but they’ll have none of that.

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