

# افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

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چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد  
بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد  
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم  
از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

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Virginia  
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## Afghanistan The Rats Abandon the Sinking Ship

What I saw on a visit to Afghanistan in February 2008, combined with the decisions some of the coalition countries have made, convinced me that Afghanistan's gradual slide towards mayhem has accelerated. This is what I mean:

The Norwegian government announced that it would close its embassy in Kabul, the first coalition government to do so. Such embassy closures bring to mind the gradual embassy closings of the 1980s during the war of resistance against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, leading to the complete abandonment of that country and the emergence of the Taliban in the mid 1990s.

In a compromise with its opposition, the Canadian government set a deadline for its military presence in Afghanistan.

Citing Taliban penetration of the northern province of Kunduz where a small Swiss military detachment had been operating, Switzerland terminated its limited but symbolically important military presence in Afghanistan.

During my stay in Kabul, I realized that most hotels and restaurants were virtually empty. On one chilly February day, a guest at the five-star Serena Hotel counted nine patrons. At lunchtime on the same day, the restaurant at the Intercontinental was as empty as the parking lot outside. Serena has closed one of its two restaurants and the solitude at the second is overwhelming.

On yet another day in February of this year, a number of forty-something Afghan-Americans, Afghan- Australians, and Afghan-Europeans, clad in blue jeans and fashionable brand-name

sweaters, had come together to spend a cheerful evening in an increasingly dreary city. Sitting in a semicircle before the fireplace and listening to the blissfully crackling of fire, the men and women sipped on their drinks and reminisced of times past. When the talk turned to the future, the light conversation came to an abrupt halt and the brief, sorrow-free moment became sullen. The assembled men and women nervously knocked back their drinks of Johnny Walker scotch and Absolut vodka—products that awhile before had been readily available at standard prices but had now become black-market goods available only under threat of prosecution and at exorbitant cost. Leaving behind good jobs and comfortable lives in the countries these Diaspora Afghans grew up, they had rushed into the mysterious promise of devastated Afghanistan. They wanted to make money; they also wished to help their poverty-stricken people with whom they identified and for whom they unexpectedly felt a great deal of compassion. Now, after several years of collecting large salaries and having been spoiled by being attended to by servants, the money and convenience were no longer enough. The Afghan government's astounding incompetence, the regime's disrespect for and disregard of the law, and the endemic corruption holding the country in its suffocating grip, had caused them to think seriously about quitting. To their amazement, they found unanimity in their feeling that they would be out of this country by 2009.

The first serious, organized, and deliberate expression of resentment happened in the same chilly month of February 2008. A group of men, with vastly different life experiences than those forty-something in Kabul, assembled in Kandahar, President Karzai's hometown, to discuss the rapidly collapsing order around them. Twenty-seven bearded tribal elders, representing 120 tribes drafted a manifesto, which—according to Afghan News, a foreign-based News organization—among other things proclaimed, “The problems now are so great, it's impossible for the government to control them. The people need to stand up.”

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That Afghanistan is in worse shape than it was when the Taliban were defeated in 2001 is now, thanks to more accurate reporting, better recognizable than even a few months ago. Up to then, it seems, the media and most other observers acquiesced to political pressure from Washington and coalition governments to refrain from criticism. With the Bush administration's fiasco in Iraq, coalition political leaders were sensitive toward too much negative news emanating from Afghanistan. Apparently, they hoped to convince the international public that Afghanistan was a success story, an example of a winning post-9/11 Western policy.

Afghanistan's government has utterly failed in steering those misery-stricken millions under its care to safer waters. Except for those who have benefited from the influx of foreigners, in whose employ they have entered, nothing has changed for the vast majority of Afghans.

After six years and despite the subsidies he is receiving, President Karzai has been unable to clean up his capital city, which is as dilapidated as it was when the international community created his administration. After six years of development activities, the city still lacks running water. City inhabitants are lucky to have three hours of electricity every other day. In a city of four million people not a single traffic light functions.

More importantly, except for the opium-driven economy that seems to be doing better each passing year, the government has failed to revive the private sector. Virtually no well-paying and secure jobs have been created. Nothing has happened that could give the people the hope for a brighter future. Precisely that, however, is the crux of the matter—giving hope to the people that things will be getting better. The war against the Taliban and other extremists can only be won if the people believe in the good work of its leaders.

Six years ago, during the first donor conference on Afghanistan in Tokyo, Mr. Karzai, referring to the thousands of refugees returning home, said the people of Afghanistan had voted with their feet. Having tragically failed to take care of those overenthusiastic refugees, most of whom now languish in tents and destroyed buildings, Today, Mr. Karzai is virtually begging Pakistan and Iran not to send home the Afghans they shelter in their countries.

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Where has the international community been while Afghanistan has been slowly and unmistakably descending toward mayhem? The short answer is: While their soldiers were fighting and dying in the deserts and mountains of Afghanistan, their civilian representatives in Kabul did not wish to know what was going on. They did not want to see too closely; they did not want to listen too carefully.

When third parties pressed them to investigate cases of corruption or fraud, they remained silent or denied that anything untoward had taken place. Since most such cases involved powerful warlords and friends of the regime, political pressure inevitably was exerted and the expatriate officials readily succumbed to it. Here are two recent cases in point: When a party brought a case of fraud to the attention of the USAID mission in Kabul, it decided to hide behind its administrative walls and remained silent. When the World Bank received information of a case where fraud, corruption, and misuse of power had taken place, the World Bank mulled over it for a long while, apparently finding it difficult to make up its mind as to what to do. Then, when the case also revealed potentially serious oversight shortcomings by World Bank officials, the responsible administrator at the World Bank simply pronounced that whatever had happened had happened and, in the future, he would make sure that it would not happen again. This cover-up not only violates the World Bank's own statutes concerning corruption and fraud, it injures the rights of the party that has been defrauded.

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No doubt, the situation in Afghanistan is grim. If nothing is done about it, that country will surely unravel.

The expatriate community and the Diaspora Afghans are lucky to have the option to bail out when things come crushing down. The vast majority of Afghans does not have the luxury of choice and depends on the moral fiber and skills of its leaders to maneuver it out of the stormy sea in which it finds itself. Those millions of Afghans have yearned patiently for six long years for a little betterment in their tragic lots. However, after seeing their old and sick die of hunger

and disease and after witnessing their babies freeze to death without the slightest care by the authorities, they have begun to wonder whether anyone, local or foreign, cares about them.

The following steps must be taken urgently to reverse Afghanistan's dangerous slide to chaos:

- 1) If they wish to regain credibility and be viewed as friends and not selfish occupiers, the United States and its coalition allies must remain true to their own values. What they do not wish for themselves, they must strongly and unequivocally oppose in Afghanistan.
- 2) They must compel the Afghan government to establish the rule of law; they must enable the government to punish those who have abused the law in the past and do so today; they must force the regime to respect the basic rights of its citizens. As unbelievable as it may sound, the secret police, a remnant from former dark times, still exist. They still drag people into their chambers and torture them regularly.

Obviously, Mr. Karzai and his regime cannot be trusted with such a drastic departure. He is too closely linked with the warlords and drug barons to be entrusted with such a radical deviation, which also seems to run counter to his natural inclinations. That means that the United States together with the international community must act immediately to abolish the present regime. In view of the enormous investment in money and prestige that the United States and its allies have made toward introducing democracy in Afghanistan, such an act may appear difficult and painful. However, if nothing drastic is done—and done forthwith—the likelihood that anything good will ever come out of Afghanistan and the region will vanish and do so at the detriment to global security.

In countries like Afghanistan, people often fear the change of leadership. When confronted with that possibility, they immediately ask, "Who could replace him?" As history has shown time and again, there will always be someone to replace a failing leader. What is needed is courage and determination and the hope that the choice will fall on the right person.