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Karzai wagers on Obama's audacity

By M K Bhadrakumar

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Public corruption in Afghanistan is taking curiously and curiously turns. A vexatious choice arises: Betraying your country to a foreign intelligence agency - is it an act of corruption? By moral and ethical standards, it appears so. By legal standards, no doubt, it is the highest form of corruption and deserves the maximum punishment.

Those accused usually perish in long, interminable solitary confinement - or fade into oblivion after a spy exchange. In the latter category, they often go on to become alcoholics as they walk into the sunset of life and the guilt of corruption begins to eat into the vitals of their conscience, which can be regarded as the highest form of God's wrath.

However, in Afghanistan, where the bizarre can become the order of the day, the United States holds the supreme power to both spawn corruption and, then, well, go through the motions of punishing it. Arguably, this must be one of the highest forms of self-flagellation known to mankind - outside of Shi'ism, that is.

Karzai spurns tough love

Take the burnt-out case of Mohammed Zia Salehi, the chief of administration for the National Security Council in the government headed by President Hamid Karzai.

The New York Times has made the sensational revelation that Salehi was almost nabbed by the Afghan agency tasked with an anti-corruption drive a month ago, but had to be summarily allowed to go scot-free at the personal intervention of the president. Salehi, quite expectedly, had been trained by the Americans with the noble objective of what has come to be known as "capacity-building" of Afghan state organs.

Salehi has apparently been working as a US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agent for donkey's years, either betraying the functioning of the presidential office or corrupting Karzai's policies by injecting careful doses of American thinking into them from time to time, thus rendering invaluable service to the US-led war and Washington's regional strategies. Not only that - the CIA used him also as a sort of cashier to disburse its payments to its other agents in Afghanistan.

Salehi's case file has now become a celebrated instance of the battle of wits between Karzai and the Barack Obama administration as it approaches a qualitatively new level of ferocity. To such an extent that at one point Karzai threatened to disband the entire US-trained anti-corruption task force and the standoff threatened to knock the bottom out of the Obama administration's AfPak strategy. It even prompted Washington to post-haste dispatch to Kabul one of the key figures in the highest echelons of the US foreign and security policy establishment, John Kerry, chairman of the foreign relations committee of the senate.

Washington let it be known through media leaks that Kerry's mission to Kabul was to do some "tough-talking" to Karzai, which indeed has been happening with an alarming frequency in recent years as part of the US's "tough-love" approach to the indomitable Afghan leader who has begun holding his political ground with an increasing tenacity that threatens to dilute American overlordship of the war itself.

But tough love is a highly complicated act to perform. We do not know what transpired between Karzai and Kerry in the presidential palace last week. There could be more than one version of the rendezvous as the two also, according to American media reports, are great friends and get along splendidly.

At any rate, no sooner had Kerry left Kabul at the conclusion of his mission, Karzai took to the media and virtually tore into the American case file on Salehi and the entire sordid business of what constitutes corruption in Afghanistan.

Karzai made three points. First, Salehi was treated shabbily by the US-trained task force, that its acts were completely out of proportion to the charge against him, namely, that he allegedly accepted a gift of a US\$10,000 car for his son for some services rendered. Surely, it was a modest gift as it could only have been a basic model of a very small car, which the status-conscious Afghan elites do not usually use. A reconditioned Nissan Micra imported from Dubai, perhaps?

It's a proxy war

But that was not the point. Karzai was finger-pointing that when there are probably much bigger sharks in the Afghan pond, the US-led drive chose to make a horrible example of Salehi because the idea was not so much as to crack down on corruption as to discredit the presidential palace itself.

It seems anti-corruption officials last month charged into Salehi's house in the wee hours of the morning, handcuffed him and tried to take him away. The worst part was that he was treated like a petty criminal in front of his family members and neighbors, which is an abominable thing of humiliation to happen to any Afghan with high social standing.

Two, Karzai challenged the US-led anti-corruption agency and ordered that it must work within Afghan laws and that it should be a "sovereign" Afghan body. In short, Karzai showed the Americans the door and said he intended to exercise his presidential prerogatives as the elected leader of a sovereign country and the US cannot behave as if Afghanistan were a vassal state.

Karzai has meanwhile issued a decree that the Afghan private militias that masquerade as "security agencies" and which are funded and engaged by the US and other Western countries by way of outsourcing aspects of the war are to be disbanded and merged with the Afghan security forces under the Interior Ministry within this year. These agencies provide guards or escort duties, gather field intelligence or even undertake controversial errands that are beyond the pale of the law.

Karzai in effect hit the Americans below the belt. The fact remains that the Americans have been engaging in a quaint form of warring in the Hindu Kush by increasingly subcontracting the war to American contractors. No one speaks about it, but this has inevitably led to massive corruption as the Pentagon patronizes its favorite American contractors, and evidently, it is all pork.

Like in the case of the Iraq war, the Afghan war also stinks and the US Congress is finally examining how billions of dollars have been spent by the US in the Hindu Kush since the invasion in late 2001.

Karzai understands perfectly well that the current "anti-corruption" drive by the US's AfPak officials is a clever move to pass the buck to the Afghan side and blame the latter for all the colossal wastage of financial resources for the war provided by American taxpayers when congress comes up with its report and the fur starts to fly.

Unsurprisingly, Karzai is not willing to be made the fall guy. A third point he made, therefore, is that he is not even in charge of the gravy train running through the Hindu Kush. Afghan officials have pointed out that only a small portion - less than 20% - of the international aid flow into Afghanistan is routed through the Kabul government, whereas the remaining 80% is handled directly by the donor countries.

This acrimony as to who holds the aid strings is actually as ancient as the hills. The Americans have never questioned the veracity of Karzai's claim, which is backed by UN officials, too. But why has it erupted with such ferocity?

The heart of the matter is that Karzai seems to suspect that an invidious US attempt is on to replace him. He would have certainly noted that the New [York](#) Times devoted a full-page article on the Afghan war recently, a key portion of which virtually demanded the Obama administration to have a rethink over Karzai's continuance in office.

Karzai is a sophisticated politician and knows what the US did in Vietnam when it faced defeat in the war. The US simply kept replacing its South Vietnamese ally in Saigon's presidential palace. Karzai has indeed become a political hurdle for the US. He is far too assertive to be a faithful ally and there is no certainty that he would mature into a Nuri al-Maliki, the premier in Iraq.

Most important, he insists on piloting the search for a political settlement and is increasingly showing a propensity to build a regional consensus involving Iran, Russia, India, and others. He threatens the US's monopoly of the war and the peace process.

In essence, Karzai has concluded that the US and Pakistan have worked together to throttle his initiative to open a line to the moderate Taliban who are open to reconciliation.

The recent disclosures by the New York Times regarding the "capture" of Mullah Baradar in the southern Pakistani city of Karachi in January testify to the fact that it was a joint CIA-Inter-Service Intelligence operation. And the best claim the Americans can put forth on their performance is a preposterous explanation that they are dumb creatures and the smart Pakistanis used them as a doormat and that they were really not quite clued in on what was afoot when they swooped down on the No 2 in the Quetta shura and nabbed him in his hideout.

Karzai doesn't think the CIA comprises such imbeciles as not to know who they are dealing with when they collaborate with Pakistan's formidable ISI in a major field operation.

What is more ominous than all this is the secret meeting held by US officials in Bonn last month with some of Karzai's allies from the erstwhile Northern Alliance, with the duplicitous intent of prising them away from their political tie-ups with the Afghan leader. In short, to tear apart the spider-like web of political deals that Karzai has been astutely making to broaden and deepen his support base in anticipation of the time when he will sit down face-to-face with the Taliban.

The supreme irony is that the US has been instigating Karzai's Northern Alliance allies belonging to non-Pashtun ethnic groups by portraying the Afghan leader as an appeaser of the Taliban and tapping into their visceral fears of a Taliban takeover in Afghanistan.

Karzai has reason to suspect that the game played by the US's AfPak officials is extremely devious as it happens just before the Afghan parliamentary elections due on September 8. Karzai is pinning his hopes on getting a parliament elected with which he can work in harmony, unlike the previous legislative body that was under the influence of the American Embassy in Kabul.

Can Obama rein in the Pentagon?

Karzai estimates that he would have to carry the parliament along as representing the collective opinion of the Afghan people in any political settlement. If Karzai's plan for the parliamentary elections succeeds, thanks to his broad-ranging alliance with non-Pashtun groups, and he gets a parliament with which he can work so as to evolve a national consensus, it would lethally damage the US's entire strategy to control and prescribe the contours of any Afghan settlement.

The core issue is, as reports in the New York Times and the Washington Post last week pointed out, that all indications are that the US has no intention of vacating its military presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia in the foreseeable future. And it is only through a pliant regime in Kabul that the Pentagon can hope to negotiate a favorable status of forces agreement. The issue is of fundamental importance to the US's regional strategy of "containment" of China, Iran and Russia and doesn't allow any scope for compromise.

Writing in Foreign Policy, Selig Harrison, a renowned scholar and author of *Out of Afghanistan*, touched on the huge political dilemma facing Obama - how to leave Afghanistan without "losing". He pointed out that it was only by the US agreeing to a "neutral" Afghanistan that the war could be brought to a conclusive end.

But Harrison foresees that Obama will have a tough fight on his hands within his own camp in Washington as he inches toward a political settlement in Afghanistan. He wrote:

The biggest obstacle to the accord is not likely to come from Pakistan, but from a Pentagon mindset in which the projection of US power is viewed as a desirable end in of itself. Some of the 74 US bases in Afghanistan, including the airfields, are designed solely for counter-insurgency operations and might be expendable in a neutralization accord.

But the mammoth airfields at Bagram and Kandahar are projected to grow in the years ahead - ambitious new construction projects continue at both bases, despite Obama's pledge to begin withdrawing troops from the country in the summer of 2011. Furthermore, congress is considering funding requests, totaling \$300 million, to establish new bases at Camp Dwyer and Shindand, close to the Iranian border, and Mazar-i-Sharif, near Central Asia and Russia. Aware of Afghan opposition to "permanent bases", Pentagon and White House officials now speak of "permanent access", which would guarantee the use of these bases for intelligence surveillance operations.

Conceivably, the benefit of the doubt could be given to Obama that he is either not in the loop about Pentagon thinking or that he is "yet to address" the future of US bases in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Harrison is inclined to feel that the latter is the case.

In either case, it is Obama who will finally call the shots and decide whether the Pentagon will still use Afghanistan to "further its global power projection goals long after the Taliban and al-Qaeda are a distant memory", Harrison estimates with a profound sense of the history of the 30-year Afghan conflict.

In sum, Karzai has an epic fight on his hands. He either pulls back his Afghan instincts of pride, self-respect and fierce independence and strikes a Faustian deal, or he treads on the Pentagon's global strategy. It could be a fatal choice either way for him.

Ironically, Karzai's best hope is that Obama refuses to be an "establishment president" and lives up to the promise he held out at the time of his election campaign. But the rhetoric of 2008 is now history. What matters in the hurly burly of politics is the "here" and the "now".

The outcome of the US Congressional elections in November could prove to be a watershed event in Karzai's tumultuous political career as much as it could be for Obama's meteoric appearance on the world stage as a man of peace.