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America, condoms and the Taliban

By M K Bhadrakumar

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The Pakistanis use an earthy metaphor when they want to put their American interlocutors on the defensive. They complain that the United States used Pakistan like a condom, simply discarded it when it is no longer useful, as has happened time and again in the Cold War era. By saying so, they urge the Americans to be constant in friendship.

The Afghans will be feeling the same way about the Americans. One look at CNN on Tuesday afternoon was sufficient to see the misery on the face of Afghan President Hamid Karzai as he lined up for a photo-op announcing that he had been stripped of the votes that would have given him victory in the presidential election, and a runoff against Abdullah Abdullah will be held on November 7.

A cultural mishap has taken place. The Americans didn't seem to care it was unprecedented for a Popolzai chief to be made to admit defeat in front of his people.

Karzai insisted until last weekend he would not accept interference by foreigners in deciding the outcome of the election, which he claimed he won in August's first round. On Tuesday, he retracted in public view without offering an explanation. Karzai caved in, realizing he had irretrievably lost that gravitas without which he cannot hope to be a ruler in Afghanistan.

John Kerry, chairman of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, reportedly sat in the presidential palace and pressured Karzai for a total of 72 hours not to insist he won the election. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had a 40-minute phone conversation with Karzai on Friday; British Prime Minister Gordon Brown called from London three times; French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner came all the way to Kabul to participate in the arm-twisting (and to explore a future role for Abdullah, one of France's blue-eyed "Panjshiri boys"); and dutifully enough, United Nations secretary general Ban Ki-moon and North Atlantic Treaty Organization secretary general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, made their own contributions from New York and Brussels to the campaign to get Karzai to sign his political obituary.

In their triumphalism, however, the Western capitals haven't quite grasped that Afghans will not respect those incapable of giving steadfast friendship, either. Whether Karzai was efficient or corrupt is no more the issue. The issue is the Afghan perception that Westerners use their friends like condoms - to be discarded after use.

This will have implications for the much-touted "Afghanization" strategy. Surely, any "Afghanization" of the war in the Hindu Kush needed to be built around the phallic power of an alpha male - figuratively put, of course - and that has become impossible now. No matter who wins the November 7 runoff, he will carry the cross of being an American puppet, which undercuts the "Afghanization" strategy.

Arguably, the only feasible way of "Afghanization" was the route Karzai took - via coalitions with local commanders, warlords, mujahideen, tribal *maliks* (chiefs) and the mullahs. "Afghanization" depended on a key Pashtun figure with the capacity to network. Between Karzai and Abdullah, the choice is limited as that figure can only be Karzai.

The theatrics in Kabul over the weekend (which US President Barack Obama has, astonishingly, commended) underline that the US is actually not looking for a strong Afghan power structure. All the talk of the Afghan election being fraudulent and the United Nations-supported electoral watchdog ruled a new round is baloney. As the Pakistani author Tariq Ali wrote, "The Hindu Kush mountains must have resounded to the sound of Pashtun laughter."

Make no mistake about it, the runoff, too, will be largely fraudulent. Ban told the BBC the UN wanted 200 poll fraud officials "fired" (out of a total contingent of 380) so that the runoff could be made "credible". Pray, who will replace them and also vet the credentials of the few thousand hands additionally required to man the polling booths? And all this to be worked out within the next fortnight, which is all the time left for the UN to hold the runoff.

Such being the facts of life, why should there have been the brouhaha about Karzai having lost a clear-cut win by 0.3% of the total votes cast in the first round? The fact is that the US feared Karzai might become a thorn in the flesh if he got elected on his own steam with the help of his coalition partners by hook or crook. This might appear a contradiction when the war itself is all but lost. However, there is a logical explanation.

The US can be expected to kickstart in the very near future a determined effort to co-opt the Taliban. The foreplay has begun. What is on the cards is that the Taliban elements will be allowed in to fill the void in the local power structures.

The gateway opens when the local elections are held next year. Significantly, Japan has been approached by the US to establish a military presence in southern Afghanistan. (Japan had kept a line open to the Taliban regime in Kabul.)

The Obama administration is adopting a revisionist approach towards the Taliban. To be fair, Obama has no reason to be on a revenge act in the Hindu Kush, as was the case with his predecessor eight years ago. Bob Woodward detailed in his book *Bush At War* that it was precisely this issue as to whether the Taliban was to be regarded as America's enemy, which dominated the war cabinet's discussions in the White House and Camp David in the critical weeks since September 11, 2001, before the US special forces sneaked into Afghanistan in late October, 2001.

The eight-year old discussion has come full circle. True, the Taliban aren't necessarily America's enemies. Nor should they be kept out of their country's national life. Arguably, too, the Taliban were driven to take help from al-Qaeda after a long, patient wait for US recognition that never came. So, if the Taliban pose no threat to the US security and if only the Taliban sever links with the al-Qaeda, Obama would be inclined to take a fresh look at them.

It appears Obama's gatekeeper, Rahm Emanuel, in his CNN interview on Sunday threw a hint:

You have literally got into a situation, is there another way you can do this? And the president is asking the questions that have never been asked ... And before you commit troops, which is not irreversible but puts you down a certain path, before you make that decision, there's a set of questions that have to have answers that have never been asked. And it's clear after eight years of war, that's basically starting from the beginning, and those questions never got asked ... What is the relationship between the Taliban? Are there different grades of Taliban? That is what the analysis is going on in the situation room.

In sum, Obama had two options by way of "Afghanization" of the war. One was the road taken by Karzai in league with the "warlords", which made him a key figure. But Washington may choose an exit strategy built around incremental "Talibanization" of the Afghan local power structure. Karzai II may have just realized he isn't indispensable to the Americans after all.