

Anti-US protest reveals depth of Afghanistan's social and political crisis

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Several hundred Afghans chanting "Death to Bush" and "Long Live Islam" marched through Kabul on Tuesday in the first demonstration explicitly against the US military occupation of the country. The protest revealed the deep hostility and resentment of broad layers of the population to the country's appalling social conditions and the broken promises of the US and its allies to alleviate the situation.

Organised by self-styled philosopher Sediq Afghan, about 300 people gathered outside government offices in the city centre. The group, which included university students, government workers and political activists, swelled in size and marched through the streets to the presidential palace to register demands for better security and economic reconstruction. Others called for the withdrawal of foreign troops. "We don't want the Brits and the Americans," one student shouted.

Afghan, a prominent critic of the Soviet-backed regime in the 1980s, bitterly explained: "They have lied to us. At the beginning we thought that the United States was one of the good countries, the most wealthy country, and it would help us. Then we saw they came here to capture Afghanistan. I think the US intends to keep us hungry." He pledged to continue the peaceful protests until the demands are met.

Those who participated had a confused mixture of grievances and demands, including reactionary denunciations of "Jew and Christians" and calls for an Islamic state. But the overwhelming sentiment was anger at the failure of Washington and the US-backed government in Kabul to provide for the most elementary needs of ordinary people. Many were government employees who simply have not been paid for months.

Said Reshad, 19, told the *Washington Post* that his father, who works for the Finance Ministry, has not received any wages for three months. "We sold the carpets and the refrigerator. Now we'll borrow money to live. Finally, we'll have to start stealing something to eat. We'll join the Taliban just to support our family. If they'll give us money, we'll join them."

Abdul Mohammad, a former soldier who lost part of his arm in a mine explosion, explained to the *Chicago Tribune* that the government compensation payment for wounded war veterans was \$2 and sometimes even that was not being paid. "They [the US] are breaking their promises," he said. "They promised to build our country and make factories but they have not kept their promises. They put one leg in Afghanistan and one in Iraq, and they keep both peoples hungry. The only things we got from America is

bombs... nothing else."

The Afghan administration is acutely conscious of the widespread public anger and of its own inability to resolve any of the country's pressing social problems. Speaking about the protest, Deputy Interior Minister Hilaluddin Hilal explained: "This is a problem for the government of Afghanistan. If the US would help rebuild Afghanistan, then the organisers wouldn't have so many people joining them."

The protest came just days after US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld visited Afghanistan and declared that the US had moved from "major combat activity" to a period of "stabilisation and reconstruction activities." There were "pockets of resistance in certain parts of the country" that the US military would help the Afghan government and army deal with. However, "the bulk of this country today is permissive, it's secure," he insisted.

Rumsfeld's remarks bear no relation to the actual military situation. Operations involving hundreds of American troops, backed by massive air support, are continuing in an effort to suppress a growing number of attacks on US and allied troops. On April 25, two US soldiers were killed and four others wounded in a daytime clash near the border with Pakistan, sparking another major hunt.

Last week, just prior to Rumsfeld's visit, US Major General John Vines bluntly explained to the press that while certain parts of the country were stable, "in other parts, it's terribly dangerous. That has not changed and that probably won't change in the foreseeable future." He denied he was contradicting the assessment being made by Rumsfeld and the Pentagon, but did not explain why.

Rumsfeld's announcement certainly does not mean that Washington is about to relinquish its military grip over Afghanistan or wind back US troop numbers. Last week Lieutenant General Dan McNeill, the top US commander in Afghanistan, said he doubted that any reduction in the 8,500-strong American force could take place for at least a year. While McNeill indicated Afghan troops were being trained to take over, the *New York Times* reported that other US commanders felt there was still "a long way to go before they feel confident enough to turn over Afghanistan's security to the Afghans."

The real purpose of Rumsfeld's statement had nothing to do with a changed military situation but was aimed at improving Kabul's prospects of soliciting international reconstruction money. As the *New York Times* noted, McNeill and Afghanistan President

Hamid Karzai “have been pressing Washington for months for this transition, so as to attract international contributions. Large new reconstruction projects like rebuilding the road between Kabul and Kandahar in the south would give Mr Karzai a big political boost and reenergise the flagging Afghan economy.”

This week’s anti-US protest simply highlights the very narrow social base on which the Karzai administration rests. Its writ does not extend beyond Kabul and the immediate surrounds, and, as the demonstration indicated, even in the capital, Karzai’s support is tenuous at best. Those who took part in the protest were for the most part educated and better-off layers who initially took Washington at its word. But as their hand-to-mouth existence shows no signs of improving, they are becoming increasingly hostile.

The Karzai government has no money with which to pay the majority of its employees. It has a budget of just \$550 million for the present fiscal year. In the Interior Ministry alone, 96,000 workers, most of them police and border guards, have not been paid for at least two months. Last year the government received only 16 percent of the \$1.8 billion in international aid—the rest was managed directly by donor countries and aid agencies.

The Bush administration has made clear that it is not going to foot the bill. The Pentagon is ostentatiously pointing to the assistance being offered by its military civil affairs teams outside Kabul. By the end of the year, the US military will have several hundred military personnel stationed in eight regional centres who will be engaged in building schools, digging wells and other small-scale projects. However, the total budget for the teams is a mere \$12 million.

The scale of the social disaster in Afghanistan is immense. Even in comparatively better-off Kabul, where most of the aid agencies are concentrated, there is widespread unemployment and poverty. In an interview last week, Pierre Salignon, program director for the aid group Médecins Sans Frontières, explained: “Kabul is 70 percent destroyed, and people throughout the city live in an extremely precarious situation. The public assumes that peace in Afghanistan has returned but the reality is different: insecurity for civilians amidst an armed peace with ethnic tensions. And while international aid is concentrated in the capital, it has been poorly developed.”

Salignon’s agency has concentrated on helping the many thousands of squatters in Kabul—refugees who have returned to the capital but have no job. “The squatters in Kabul are proof that the reconstruction process has stalled,” Salignon said. “Even with so many humanitarian agencies present, little is being done for these tens of thousands of families who can’t find stable work, a regular food supply, or access to basic medical care. They live in cramped rooms, often with several other families, so there is a high risk of child mortality and the spread of epidemics.”

Outside Kabul, conditions are far worse. The US has perpetuated the arbitrary rule of a myriad of feuding warlords and local militia leaders who establish their own laws and exact their own taxes, taking the lion’s share for themselves and their close supporters. At last month’s session of the UN Commission on Human Rights, US officials blocked any criticism of the human rights abuses in Afghanistan, past or present, for the simple reason that any

investigation would be compelled to focus on the atrocious record of those being supported by the Bush administration.

An article in the *Washington Post* last month described the situation in Kandahar where US-sponsored warlord Gul Agha Shirzai presides as local governor. As the newspaper politely put it: “During his tenure in office, Gul Agha, his family and his tribe have benefitted visibly from US largesse—while rival tribal leaders seethe and life for Kandahar’s poor remains unrelentingly hardscrabble.” Gul Agha rakes in taxes and duties, runs local businesses and maintains his own private militia.

Sarah Chayes, field director of the Kandahar-based Afghans for Civil Society, told the newspaper that Gul Agha’s family had made it difficult for her group to get stone from public lands to rebuild homes razed by US bombs. “Our tractors were held up at gunpoint,” she said. “Gul Agha told me, ‘We’re making a cement factory. So my advice to you is make your foundation out of brick with cement.’ I took that to mean: Buy my cement and give me money.”

A local car dealer summed up the situation. “We have so many problems in Kandahar. We don’t have drinking water. The roads are broken. Nobody has helped us. We haven’t seen anything here from the Americans. We are not happy. The Taliban are trying to get the power again. Some people are supporting them.”

Elsewhere, villages remain in ruins after being bombed by the US military. A *Washington Post* article on April 28 pointed out that Madoo in eastern Afghanistan has received no US assistance some 17 months after American war planes levelled much of the hamlet killing at least 55 men, women and children. Madoo was just one of several villages attacked during the US offensive at Tora Bora in December 2001.

The newspaper explained: “Once home to 300 people, Madoo has lost roughly half of its population, villagers say. In addition to the dozens killed by US air strikes, many others lost their homes and moved away. The people who remain are destitute. They live crowded in a few stone and timber homes they’ve managed to rebuild on their own. They subsist on bread and the vegetables they grow. Several children look slight and frail.”

The US Congress has proposed aid for the victims of American bombing in Afghanistan, but the Bush administration, not wanting to admit to any of its crimes, has effectively blocked the scheme. “Both the US military and the State Department are leery of setting legal precedents for compensation and have declined to establish programs that either systemically document civilian losses or give Afghans the opportunity to apply for reparations,” the *Washington Post* wrote.

The anger and frustration revealed in this week’s protest in Kabul is just the tip of the iceberg. As Karzai commented recently with a note of despair, “we really are at the eleventh hour.”



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