

US war criminals hail new puppet regime in Afghanistan

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When Hamid Karzai arrived to be sworn in as Afghan president on Tuesday, US Vice President Richard Cheney and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld were among the hundreds of guests who rose to give him a standing ovation. With a continuing disaster unfolding for the US in Iraq, the Bush administration was determined to make the most of the so-called success story in Afghanistan.

But all the pomp and ceremony could not hide the empty character of this charade. The proceedings took place under heavy military protection with snipers on rooftops, US Apache attack helicopters overhead and soldiers patrolling the streets on foot and in armoured vehicles. In addition to large numbers of US and NATO troops, the Afghan army and police were mobilised to block off the main streets and post guards at every major intersection in the capital.

Inside, the select guests included a number of the notorious warlords, on whom the US relied to oust the former Taliban regime in late 2001. But the most telling refutation of the democratic pretensions of this gathering was the presence of Cheney and Rumsfeld themselves: the war criminals who are directly responsible for the illegal invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the slaughter of innocent civilians, the arbitrary arrest and torture of thousands, and ongoing military operations in both countries that continue the pattern of death and destruction.

Speaking to US troops at the Bagram base north of Kabul, Cheney declared: “For the first time the people of this country are looking confident about the future of freedom and peace. Freedom still has enemies here in Afghanistan, and you are here to make those enemies miserable.” In other words, “free Afghanistan” will remain subject to a military occupation under which 18,000 US-led troops roam the country at will, suppressing any opposition to the US-installed puppet regime in Kabul.

To claim that democratic elections could be held under such circumstances is absurd. Not only does the US function as the country’s military overlord but it also controls the financial purse strings. It is hardly surprising that Karzai, Washington’s obvious favorite, won the presidential poll. Even leaving aside allegations of vote rigging and fraud, among those who marshalled the vote—the militia leaders, tribal chiefs and local potentates—there was a recognition that Karzai was the best means of assuring continued US patronage.

In an interview at the Bagram base with NBC, Cheney boasted: “We got the job done in Afghanistan... Who would have said three years ago, here in Afghanistan with the situation that existed at the time, that we’re going to be able to achieve all that we achieved? [They said] it’s never been done in 5,000 years. Right, but we got it done and we’re going to get it done in Iraq.”

Of course, Cheney did not explain, nor did NBC ask, exactly what the US has “achieved” in Afghanistan. Indirectly, Karzai gave a few clues in his short acceptance speech. After pompously proclaiming that “a new chapter in our history” was opening up, Washington’s man in Kabul declared that “the destruction of poppy cultivation” and “security and stability” would be the two priorities of his new administration.

Just how Karzai is going to tackle these issues is completely unclear. In three years of US military occupation, Afghanistan has become what some commentators refer to as a “narco-state”. Prior to its overthrow, the Taliban regime had all but eradicated opium production. Now it is the world’s largest producer, accounting for an estimated 75 percent of global supply and rapidly increasing.

According to a recent UN report, opium production in Afghanistan expanded by a massive 64 percent this year despite all the efforts of the Kabul regime, backed by US and British drug enforcement agencies, to curtail it. The

UN estimated the value of the opium crop at \$2.8 billion, equivalent to more than 60 percent of the country's GDP for 2003.

In releasing the report last month, UN official Antonio Maria Costa warned: "The fear that Afghanistan might degenerate into a narco-state is slowly becoming a reality as corruption in the public sector, the die-hard ambition of local warlords, and the complicity of local investors are becoming a factor in Afghan life."

In expressing his determination to tackle poppy production, Karzai conveniently blamed the problem on "terrorists". "The war against terrorism has not finished yet. Even though terrorists are not a very big, destructive danger for us, their drug smuggling is what concerns us now in the region and in the world," he declared.

It is not, however, the Taliban or Al Qaeda who are primarily responsible for the multibillion-dollar opium and heroin industry but the regional warlords and militia commanders who hold sway throughout the country. Many of these thugs, notorious for their brutality, have been close allies of the US military and part of the previous Karzai administrations.

Senior World Bank adviser William Byrd noted in a report in September: "Various parts of Afghanistan have been captured by regional powerbrokers who oppose reform. Their operations are fuelled by the opium trade and bolstered by their ability to rule illegitimately by force, relatively unchecked, outside Kabul."

Karzai has on occasions pledged to curb the power of the warlords. He announced that his new administration would be free of their influence. Nevertheless, among the guests at his inauguration were some of the most powerful local warlords—Ustad Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, Mohammed Qassim Fahim and Abdul Rashid Dostum. Sayyaf is a proponent of Wahabbism—the brand of Islamic fundamentalism promoted by Saudi Arabia. Fahim served as defence minister in the previous Karzai cabinet and Dostum was one of the president's top security advisers.

The nexus between drugs, warlords and Islamic extremism is not a new phenomenon but goes back to the CIA's operations against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul in the 1980s. The CIA, along with Saudi Arabia, spent billions of dollars arming and training various Mujaheddin factions. The US agents turned a blind eye, or perhaps even encouraged, the lucrative opium trade, which the anti-Soviet militia and their Pakistani advisers exploited to help pay for their activities.

Encouraged by Pakistan and tacitly the US, the Taliban emerged in the mid-1990s as a reaction against the brutal

and arbitrary rule of the rival warlords and Mujaheddin commanders who dominated the country following the collapse of the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul. What the Bush administration has "achieved" through its 2001 invasion is to resurrect these local and regional thugs, along with their opium trade, as the basis for its domination of the country.

Even the Taliban are not to be left out. While Cheney and Rumsfeld were hailing the demise of the Taliban regime as a "success" in the US "war on terrorism", an offer of amnesty was being made to its former leaders and fighters to participate in parliamentary elections due next year. Significantly last week's proposal was not made by Karzai, but by the real power in Kabul—US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad. The aim is to allow Washington to scale back its military forces in Afghanistan, to allow for possible redeployment to Iraq.

The Bush administration's decision to court the former Taliban leaders underscores the fact that the US invasion of Afghanistan was not based on any fundamental opposition to these Islamic reactionaries. Still less was it about the welfare of the Afghan people, most of whom continue to live in abject poverty without access to basic services. Rather the real achievement of which Cheney was bragging was the installation of a puppet regime in Kabul to further US strategic and economic ambitions in Afghanistan and the neighbouring resource-rich regions.



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