

Afghanistan: anti-Muslim cartoons provide focus for hostility to US-led occupation

James Cogan
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The wave of demonstrations in Afghanistan against the publication of anti-Islamic cartoons in newspapers around the globe reflects more than anything else the pervasive hostility that exists toward the US-led occupation. Provided with a focus for their anger, thousands of Afghans have rallied outside American and NATO military bases to not only denounce the vilification of their religion, but also the Bush administration and the continuing presence of foreign troops. The protests have not been confined to the Pashtun-speaking southern provinces where the former Taliban regime derived most of its support, but have taken place in cities and towns across the country.

The occupation forces and the US-backed government of President Hamid Karzai have responded with brutal repression. Since Sunday, US and NATO troops and Afghan police have fired into five demonstrations, killing at least 11 people and wounding dozens more. Many other protests have been violently dispersed with baton charges and tear gas.

Protestors were gunned down in the capital Kabul and the central city of Mihtalam on Sunday; outside the US base at Bagram on Monday; and in the remote northern city of Maimana on Tuesday.

The target of the demonstration in Maimana was a base manned by Norwegian and Finnish units serving in Afghanistan as part of the 9,000-strong, NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Norwegian newspapers were among the first to republish the cartoons mocking Islam, which were initially published in the Danish press. The Afghan protestors chanted: "Death to Denmark! Death to Norway! Death to America! Death to Bush!"

Protestors pelted the base with rocks and petrol bombs before Norwegian soldiers and police opened fire, killing three people and wounding another 22. Dozens more were overcome by tear gas. To further intimidate the local population, F-16 jet fighters were called in to perform sonic booms over the area and a detachment of British troops was rushed in as reinforcements. At least five Norwegian troops were treated for minor injuries. Fearing further unrest, the UN ordered the evacuation of non-essential staff from its agency in the city.

The same day, a demonstration outside the Danish embassy in Kabul was baton-charged by police. Two people were wounded

in the northern city of Pul-e-Khumri when Dutch troops fired on a protest with rubber bullets. Police also attacked an 8,000-strong demonstration in the western city of Herat where youth sought to storm an Italian military post. A rally in the southern city of Jalalabad was broken up by Afghan police.

On Wednesday, at least four people were shot dead in the southern city of Qalat, where around 1,000 people attempted to converge on a US military base. Police blocked their path and eventually opened fire indiscriminately into the crowd. American troops also fired shots, reportedly into the air, to try to scare off demonstrators who set ablaze three fuel tankers. Other protestors engaged in running street battles with police, throwing rocks and petrol bombs.

Demonstrations have also taken place this week in the predominantly Pashtun tribal regions of Pakistan which border Afghanistan. Hundreds of Pakistani Pashtuns are believed to be taking part in the armed resistance to the US-led occupation, while the area is used by Afghan fighters as a safe haven.

Over 5,000 people protested on Tuesday in the province of North Waziristan, while another 5,000 marched through the streets of Peshawar, the capital of North West Frontier province. The provincial government in North West Frontier is controlled by Islamic parties sympathetic to the Taliban. Mohammad Sadiq, a Muslim cleric taking part in the protest, told Reuters: "We are condemning America because it is patronising those who printed the cartoons."

On Wednesday, thousands of tribesmen gathered in Dara Adam Khel—a tribal region near Peshawar renowned for its arms bazaar—to denounce the United States, the European Union and Denmark.

More than four years since the November 2001 invasion, the protests across Afghanistan add to the evidence that the US-led occupation still only has a tenuous grip over much of the country. Fuelling anti-occupation sentiment is the continuing poverty and deprivation of the population amid the rampant corruption of the Karzai administration. A large proportion of the \$US4.5 billion in so-called reconstruction and aid that has been spent by the major powers in Afghanistan is believed to have been siphoned off into the pockets of the political elite and government officials. At the same time, unemployment in Kabul and other cities is estimated to range from 30 to 70

percent and homelessness is widespread. The majority of homes have no reliable electricity supply.

In rural areas, at least one third of the population suffers from malnutrition. Tens of thousands of farmers have once again been reduced to growing opium poppies for a brutal drug mafia which has reestablished itself since the US invasion. Afghanistan is now the source of 87 percent of the world's opium.

Many of the 3.5 million refugees who have returned to Afghanistan since 2001 are seeking to go back to Iran or Pakistan. Wadir Safi, a law professor at Kabul University, told the *Guardian* this month: "Refugees who returned to Afghanistan after the Taliban have become fed up with promises and not seeing much improvement practically. Millions returned hoping some brave new world awaited them, but found no work, no housing and no hope. The billions of dollars' worth of aid apparently given to date has made little difference to the lives of ordinary Afghans. Now the men have no option but to leave again, in order to support their families, who must remain behind. They may not be fleeing persecution this time, but they are escaping unimaginable poverty and can no longer sit by as their families starve."

As well as popular discontent, the US-led forces are confronting a growing Taliban guerilla network, which is moving fighters between bases inside Pakistan and launching a growing number of attacks on occupation and Afghan government targets.

On February 2, an estimated 200 Taliban fighters ambushed a police patrol in the southern province in Helmand—reportedly the largest operation mounted by the fundamentalist resistance for some time. Air strikes by US and British fighters and B-52 bombers had to be called in to drive them off. The following night, two government offices in Helmand were attacked. Another Taliban unit was engaged as it attempted to cross into the province of Kandahar from Pakistan.

On February 7, an alleged Taliban suicide bomber killed 13 people and injured at least another 11 when he detonated a bomb outside a police station in Kandahar. A Taliban spokesman, Mullah Dadullah, told Reuters: "More and more people are joining us to be suicide bombers. The suicide bombings will continue against coalition forces and their allies. This is part of our military strategy." The attack was the ninth suicide bombing in Kandahar in the past six months.

In Pakistan's border provinces, anger is growing over the collaboration of President Pervez Musharraf with US imperialism and the violation by his regime of the traditional autonomy exercised by the Pashtun tribes. This year, US forces have twice attacked alleged Al Qaeda and Taliban targets inside Pakistani Pashtun regions, hardening the opposition toward Musharraf and the willingness of local tribesmen to join the guerilla war in Afghanistan. The Pakistani troops deployed in the region are coming under increasing attack. Last weekend, three more soldiers were killed by roadside bomb in South

Waziristan, while a military post was blown up in North Waziristan.

A detailed feature posted by *Asia Times* on February 7 reported on the Taliban claims that it has established an "Islamic state" in the Waziristan provinces. A propaganda CD being distributed by the Taliban shows images of bases in which, according to *Asia Times*, "thousands of turban-clad youths can be seen with guns". The article, based on research by the journal's Pakistani bureau chief Syed Saleem Shahzad, postulated that a "summer offensive" is being prepared by the Taliban against the occupation forces and the Karzai government.

Any stepped-up activity by Taliban guerillas in the summer will coincide with the major reorganisation of forces that is scheduled to take place in Afghanistan. An additional 6,000 NATO troops are slated to replace American units in the volatile southern provinces, including Helmand and Kandahar. The deployment will increase the number of NATO troops in the country to some 15,000, while the US military will reduce its force from approximately 20,000 to 16,000.

The extra NATO force will be under British command and based around a British contingent of some 3,000 troops. The Dutch parliament finally agreed this week to send 1,400 troops, after intense pressure from Washington. In January, the former US proconsul in Iraq Paul Bremer bluntly told the journal *De Volksrant* that if the Dutch troops didn't go, the US could take "economic retaliation" against the Netherlands. Denmark will be sending a further 300 troops. The other main contributors will be Canada and an extra 200 troops are being sent by the Australian government.

The deployment of these military forces for the occupation of Afghanistan is without any doubt a factor in the promotion of anti-Muslim sentiment across Europe and in Australia. The NATO contingent will be responsible for repressing an increasingly rebellious population and will be the target of the Taliban guerillas. The publication of the chauvinist cartoons is part of a campaign to condition public opinion at home for the inevitable atrocities that the NATO troops commit, and the inevitable casualties that they will suffer.



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