

Obama's Afghan visit: laying down the law to a US puppet

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The recent visit by President Barack Obama to Afghanistan, and its subsequent coverage in the American media, have helped clarify the nature of Washington's relationship to the Kabul regime.

As the *Washington Post* noted, Obama's first trip to Afghanistan as president "was brief and in darkness," for security reasons. He arrived at Bagram air base, notorious as a scene of US military abuse and murder of detainees, met with Afghan and American officials at the presidential palace (the former were only alerted to the US president's visit a few hours ahead of time), made a demagogic speech before American troops at Bagram prior to "flying out of the country before dawn."

One of the principal aims of Obama's trip was to lay down the law, gangster-style, to Afghan President Hamid Karzai over the latter's recent flirtations with China and Iran. Karzai traveled to Beijing and Tehran in the last few weeks, and he also received a visit from Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The *Washington Post* politely referred to Obama's surprise Afghan stopover as "a chance to remind Karzai of the need to work closely with the United States."

What did the US president tell Karzai during their discussions Sunday night? Did he remind the Afghan leader that the American government and military had installed him in power in December 2001? Did he point to the billions of dollars in US aid that had flown into Kabul since that time, much of it ending up in the pockets of Karzai's relatives and cronies? Did he threaten the Afghan president, or even hint that he might end up like Ngo Dinh Diem, the Vietnamese president of South Vietnam, and long-time US asset, assassinated in a CIA-organized coup in 1963?

The American media coverage of the event pointed to the acrimony of the conversation. The *Washington Post* described it as "a brief, unhappy encounter." A good deal of ink was spilled in the media over supposed Obama administration concerns about pervasive corruption in the Afghan regime, one of the most graft-ridden on earth. This, however, is purely for public consumption. After all, the US put Karzai in the presidential palace, and has kept his hated

regime in place for more than eight years.

To put things in perspective: Hamid Karzai's brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, "the most powerful man in southern Afghanistan," is a CIA asset, paid regularly "for many years for performing a variety of services" (including operating anti-Taliban death squads)—and will be kept in power by the US military for that reason, despite his well-known, lucrative links to the drug trade (*New York Times*, March 30, 2010).

Washington and the American media know perfectly well what they have in the Afghan president—a venal, wealthy, ruthless politician; the current difficulties result from the US puppet attempting to establish a certain independence from his American overlords.

A news article in the *New York Times* ("Afghan Leader Is Seen to Flout Influence of U.S.," March 29, 2010) and an op-ed piece by *Times* columnist Thomas Friedman ("This Time We Really Mean It," March 31, 2010) shed some light on the complexities of the present situation.

The first article complains about the "red carpet treatment" received by Iran's Ahmadinejad in Kabul and points to it as "just one example of how Mr. Karzai is putting distance between himself and his American sponsors.... Mr. Karzai now often voices the view that his interests and the United States' no longer coincide." It later observes that during the Iranian leader's visit, "With Mr. Karzai standing at his side in Kabul, Mr. Ahmadinejad accused the United States of promoting terrorism."

Furthermore, according to the *Times*, Karzai hosted a lunch for prominent Afghan media and business figures in January at which "he expressed a deep cynicism about America's motives, and of the burden he bears in trying to keep the United States at bay. 'He has developed a complete theory of American power,' said an Afghan who attended the lunch and who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retribution. 'He believes that America is trying to dominate the region, and that he is the only one who can stand up to them.' "

One would assume it was the *Times* reporters who chose to

dub Karzai's view of "America's motives" as "deep cynicism." This rather clear-eyed notion of US geopolitical ambition, in fact, is shared by a healthy portion of the world's population.

The newspaper's account of the January meeting continued: "Mr. Karzai said that, left alone, he could strike a deal with the Taliban, but that the United States refuses to allow him. The American goal, he said, was to keep the Afghan conflict going, and thereby allow American troops to stay in the country."

"Mr. Karzai's ultimate motives are not always clear. It may be that while Mr. Karzai supports the Americans' presence here, he believes that distancing himself from the United States plays well among average Afghans."

The last comment, made in passing, is worth noting. It acknowledges what every objective observer understands, that masses of the Afghan population despise the American and allied forces as foreign occupiers. A recent piece from the Global Post news service, commenting on a US outpost in Kandahar province, noted: "Rejection rates of the American presence run high, with locals maintaining a standoffish attitude toward patrolling troops and their Afghan National Army counterparts. 'They hate us,' said one soldier who requested that his name not be printed."

And why shouldn't they? The US encounter with Afghanistan over the past three decades has been catastrophic for the Afghan people. Tens of thousands of American troops are currently terrorizing the civilian population on the ground and through the air. The Karzai regime defended by US military force presides over unspeakable conditions for the masses of people.

A UN report released Tuesday explained that over a third of Afghans live in "absolute poverty" and approximately the same number are only slightly above the poverty line. "Only 23 percent of the population have access to safe drinking water, and only 24 percent of the population above the age of 15 can read and write, with much lower literacy rates among women and nomadic populations," the report alleged.

Also on Tuesday, the Inter Press Service noted the findings of the international children's rights organization Terre des Hommes, which concluded that nearly two out of three male juveniles arrested in Afghanistan were abused. The report, according to IPS, "reveals a justice system that subjects juveniles, many of whom are already innocent victims, to torture, forced confessions and blatant violation of their rights in court."

None of this misery and violence disturbs the sleep of Obama administration officials or *New York Times* staff members.

On the other hand, *Times* columnist Thomas Friedman found his newspaper's article on Karzai's flouting his US

paymasters "very troubling." The piece, he explained, "detailed how President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan had invited Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, to Kabul—in order to stick a thumb in the eye of the Obama administration."

Friedman then cites the account of the January lunch at which Karzai criticized US motives in Afghanistan. He goes on: "That is what we're getting for risking thousands of U.S. soldiers and having spent \$200 billion already." The bitterness, which reminds one of an employer who feels he's been cheated by a veteran retainer's "disloyalty," is palpable. All that cash paid out, and what have we got to show for it!

(In a recent issue, the *New Republic* magazine summed up the master-servant character of US-Afghan relations, as well as the nature of Afghanistan's "democratic" elections, rather succinctly. It noted that Obama officials "made no secret of the fact that the United States was looking for alternatives [to Karzai]. No suitable replacement could be found, however, and Karzai's re-election in August 2009 was never much in doubt." Did US officials place a want ad?)

In the course of his op-ed, Friedman is also obliged to take note of the reality referred to above: the hostility of the Afghan people toward the US occupation: "When Karzai believes that the way to punish America...is by inviting Iran's president to Kabul—who delivered a virulently anti-U.S. speech from inside the presidential palace—you have to pay close attention to that. It means Karzai must think that anti-Americanism plays well on the streets of Afghanistan and that by dabbling in it himself...he will strengthen himself politically. That is not a good sign."

Again, the admission and the unstated assumptions are revealing. Friedman could not care less what the Afghan people think. All his chatter about "good governance" and building "something that is both decent and self-sustaining" in Afghanistan is just that.

A considerable nervousness pervades the *Times* pieces. The respective authors obviously recognize that despite the billions spent on troops and weaponry, despite past and upcoming murderous offensives, despite all the efforts made to cultivate (bribe, bully, etc.) a fully compliant regime in Kabul, the entire neo-colonial intervention in Afghanistan could still go disastrously to pieces.



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