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US defeat won't be Afghan victory

A relatively peaceful future will require that power in post-withdrawal Afghanistan be pluralistically shared.

By Pervez Hoodbhoy

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Ever since US Sergeant Robert Bales surrendered after calmly massacring Afghan women and children, he has been depicted as a man under unusual personal circumstances. A high-ranking US official told the *New York Times*: “When it all comes out, it will be a combination of stress, alcohol and domestic issues – he just snapped”. Unlike those sentenced to death by drones flying high over Waziristan, Bales will enjoy a thorough investigation. Whisked out of Afghanistan, he may or may not ever be convicted. If convicted, the penalty is unlikely to exceed a few prison years; “good behaviour” may qualify him for an early parole.

Although President Obama and Secretary Clinton habitually apologise to the Afghan people after every such atrocity — of which there is a long list — the fact that they happen is inevitable. Indian troops in Kashmir, and Pakistani soldiers in Balochistan, have not behaved any differently. At the core, the problem is the forcible occupation by an army of another country or people.

The Bales case has added one more reason for cash-strapped Americans to leave, speeding up the endgame. President Obama has announced plans to shift US forces to a supporting role next year and pull out most of the 90,000 U.S. troops in the country by late 2014, with 23,000 gone by this October. US Republicans — strong enthusiasts for overseas wars and interventions — are now criticising Obama for being too slow! Rick Santorum, a leading presidential candidate, said last week “We have to either make the decision to make a full commitment, which this president has not done, or we have to decide to get out, and probably get out sooner.” A day earlier, Newt Gingrich declared in even more direct terms that it was time to leave the country.

America’s “good war” — to be distinguished from the Iraq war — is rapidly collapsing and becoming more unpopular by the day. But it once had support across the world and military success had been almost instant. Weeks after 9/11 and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan, al Qaeda was chased out and, eventually, bin Laden was killed. With time the earlier support evaporated. Except for Marine Gen. John Allen and a few others, the pretence that the US can win is almost over. It has been unable to create a stable, non-hostile Afghan government that could stop extremist groups from using Afghan territory once again. The Taliban are smelling victory.

But, much as one welcomes the US exit, America’s defeat will not be Afghanistan’s victory. The crimes of foreign occupation pale in front of the enormous crimes committed by the Taliban government, 1996-2001. Although the outside world knew the Taliban largely for having blown up the 2000-year old Bamiyan Buddha statues and their cruel treatment of women, their atrocities were far more widespread. Going from door to door, they had executed thousands in Mazar-i-Sharif after ascertaining that they were ethnic Hazaras or Shias. A 55-page UN report says that Mullah Omar’s men, while trying to consolidate control over northern and western Afghanistan, committed systematic massacres against civilians. Fifteen such massacres were committed during the period of the Taliban government until it was mercifully removed by the US invasion.

Eqbal Ahmed, who worked for Muslim causes from Palestine to Algeria, was by far the most perceptive and knowledgeable social activist and intellectual I have known. We had occasional disagreements but he too saw the Taliban as a social cancer that, if unchecked, would reduce Muslim society to medieval primitivism.

In 1998 — a year before he died — Eqbal had visited two cities under Taliban rule, Qandahar and Jalalabad. Soon after visiting a “land without music”, he wrote: “I have seen the future as envisioned by contemporary Islamists. It horrifies.” The Taliban had proscribed the pursuit of happiness: “Music is banned in historic Qandahar which had once been famous for its bards and

story tellers. Play is forbidden.”

Eqbal tells of a boy he saw paraded through the bazaar; a rope around his neck, hands on his shaven head. This unlucky lad had broken the Taliban's law. “He had been caught red handed, I was told — playing ball. Football is forbidden under Taliban rule as are basketball, volleyball and other games involving the movement of body. Boys playing ball can constitute undue temptation to men.”

Walking through the bazaars, Eqbal observed: “They are stacked with small electronic products, including transistor radios. Yet, none is playing. These bazaars are devoid of music which is banned in Qandahar, in homes no less than in public. Television is similarly banned. Homes are regularly raided, and people are harshly punished for listening to music. The chowkidar in the house next door to mine was caught in the act, and badly mauled. He misses his recorder and the tapes of ‘sweet Afghan *naghma*.”

But if the Taliban are a social cancer then what cocktail of chemotherapies can work to prevent a second recurrence? There is zero chance of a secular, pluralistic democracy. Tribal Afghan society, locked into primitive concepts of honour and revenge, is likely to remain unenlightened and torn apart by internal conflicts well into the distant future. So the real question is: what could be the least bad outcome? Since we Pakistanis must live with a theocracy next door, then one can only wish for a relatively enlightened version rather than a barbaric one.

A relatively peaceful future will require that power in post-withdrawal Afghanistan be pluralistically shared by the country's diverse ethnic groups: Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, etc. Else there will be civil war. Regional actors can and must prevent this, as well as prevent a repeat of earlier Taliban horrors. To this end, Pakistan should give up its craving for ‘strategic depth’, Iran should be brought in to the picture by the US as a helpful ally, India should refrain from intrusions into Afghanistan that might antagonise Pakistan, and China must not signal the Taliban that it can fund them in exchange for mining rights. None of this is likely but, still, why not ask for the moon. What else to do?

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