

Letter from Kabul

Anja Havedal

In 2004, when asked about the state of his country, an ordinary Burundian is known to have said, 'we can't eat the constitution.' Five years after the fall of the Taliban, the same sentiment echoes across Afghanistan.

On the one hand, it has been an impressive five years. A democratic constitution has been drafted and ratified, two relatively free and fair elections have been held, and a National Assembly – 25 percent of whose members are women – has been inaugurated for the first time since 1969. Foreign governments and donors have pledged more than US \$26 billion in aid to Afghanistan, clinics and schools have been built around the country, and there are countless NGOs and aid organisations working on everything from literacy to physical education curricula.

On the other hand is the harsh reality on the ground. Some of the new parliamentarians are the very warlords who, no more than a decade ago, destroyed much of Kabul and forced thousands to flee their homes. President Hamid Karzai is nicknamed 'the mayor of Kabul' because his government has limited, if any, presence in the provinces. And the new constitution notwithstanding, the rule of law has yet to be established. Despite the massive influx of foreign assistance, 70 percent of the Afghan population live on less than \$2 a day, unemployment hovers at over 30 percent, and many worry about how they will stay warm this winter.

To live and work in Afghanistan is to vacillate between these two realities. The hope gained upon seeing turbaned men walking their daughters to school dissipates as I am reminded that informal councils, or *shuras*, still measure justice by the number of young virgins owed by one family to another. The optimism I feel when reading about anti-corruption measures is crushed when a Ministry of Justice clerk tries to get a kickback from selling me a hard copy of the Constitution. And no matter how strong the sense of accomplishment, it is instantly replaced by a bitter taste of fear when a suicide attack makes the windows tremble. With every sign of progress, it seems, comes another indication of how far Afghanistan has yet to go.

Most frustrating and demoralising to me, as a member of the assistance community, is the disappointment one meets with among ordinary Afghans. Five years and

Democratiya 7 | Winter 2006

billions of dollars later, they say, they are still poor, hungry and jobless. In Kabul, they see government ministers travel in convoys of armoured luxury Landcruisers, while their houses are bulldozed to make room for yet another opium-financed marble palace – likely to be the second home of some warlord-cum-politician. Democracy, in their eyes, has so far only benefited the few.

In October, British Army General David Richards, who heads the 32,000-strong NATO-run International Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, warned that if Afghans do not see tangible, measurable improvements in the following six months, a majority of the population are likely to switch allegiance and ‘choose the rotten future offered by the Taliban.’ It is tragic that after so much military, economic and humanitarian assistance, the oppressive regime whose defeat was dearly celebrated in 2001 now constitutes a viable alternative to the democratically elected government. In five short years, the Taliban and its iron-fisted religious police have somehow become a lesser evil than President Karzai and the National Assembly. How can this be explained?

What may look like support for the Taliban is probably better interpreted as discontent with the new government. To understand this more clearly, imagine an archetypical village in any one of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces. The villagers used to own land, but were forced to sell it after two subsequent harvests of opium poppy – the only crop that yields sufficient income – were destroyed by government eradication teams. They now tend to the opium crops of a local commander who escaped eradication thanks to connections at the Ministry of Counter Narcotics. Many of the villagers suffer from health problems, perhaps from poor nutrition, but there is no doctor; the last one took a better-paid job as a driver for an NGO in Kabul. They would like to send their children to school, but need them to fetch water and gather wood. One day, criminals set up a check point on the road leading to the nearby market. The village sends a delegation to the provincial capital to ask the police chief for help, but he refuses to see them because they cannot afford to pay the required baksheesh, or bribe.

Not too long ago, these villagers still thought that democracy would lessen at least some of their problems. When they went to the polls in 2004 and 2005, they probably reasoned that a government chosen by the people would work for the people. But time has gone by, and the only perceivable changes have been deteriorating security and increased criminality and corruption.

HAVEDAL | Letter from Kabul

In interviews with Western journalists, Taliban leaders admit that they capitalise on the poverty and frustration of Afghan civilians. Their ranks are swollen with young men angered by the endemic corruption, disappointed by the lack of progress and humiliated by the presence and behaviour of foreign troops. According to Taliban commanders, few fighters join the insurgency for ideological or religious reasons; most are villagers who have lost confidence in the government and are looking for a way to feed their families.

A few days ago, I saw a rug thrown on a sidewalk in central Kabul. It portrayed the map of Afghanistan, a Black Hawk helicopter and a pair of tanks, and had a border composed of the flags of NATO member countries. At its centre was written 'ISAF Welcome to Afghanistan.' As people walked over it with shoes muddy from the first autumn rains, the symbolism probably escaped them. In 2001, Coalition and ISAF forces were met with open arms – despite Afghanistan's tragic history of foreign invasions. Five years later, many Afghans think that the foreign troops are better at harassing and killing innocent civilians than at providing security. They are also painfully aware that their own security forces, the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police, would not stand a chance against a band of armed criminals or religious insurgents. Given that a police officer's salary is one-fifth that of a Taliban fighter, they are probably more likely to join them.

As I am writing this, NATO heads of state and government are in Riga, Latvia, looking to raise troop levels in Afghanistan. From the perspective of the Afghan street, it does not appear that more troops alone will solve the problem. Rendering Afghanistan safe and stable will remain a Sisyphean task until ordinary people gain confidence in their government and begin to reap the benefits of democracy and development.

It takes time for democracy to take root, and development programmes cannot reverse decades of war and destruction overnight. Nonetheless, time is running out. If the reconstruction effort does not begin to improve the lives of the Afghan majority soon, the Taliban will have recruited the villagers by the time we get there.

Anja Havedal is an editor with the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) in Kabul, managing publications and advocacy activities in the areas of governance, political economy, customary law and natural resource management. She was previously on the editorial staff of the *Journal of Democracy*.