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# GOPALAN: Pulling the Afghan bus from the ditch

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What to do with Afghanistan? Despite President Obama's 30,000-strong troop surge and millions of dollars being poured in, the Afghan bus has not managed to extricate itself from the ditch in which it has been stuck. The Pentagon's report to Congress yesterday underlines what most people already know: The population "sympathizes with or supports the Afghan government" in just 24 percent of the key parts of Afghanistan. As the report concedes, the insurgents "perceive 2009 as their most successful year."

Progress on governance has been minimal: Afghans perceive their government to be corrupt and incompetent - 83 percent reported that corruption affects their daily lives - a fact exploited to the hilt by the Taliban. Damningly for the Karzai government, the Pentagon admits that the "Taliban ... is an adjudicator in providing swift and less corrupt dispute resolution" and that "courts are understaffed and chronically corrupt." Moreover, "only 50 percent of Afghans believed that prisons were capable of holding prisoners for the duration of their sentences," probably because of high-profile prison escapes and pardons by corrupt politicians. The report also suggests that there is no political will to tackle corruption and political meddling actually might be counteracting anti-corruption efforts.

What is the use of propping up President Hamid Karzai if the Taliban offers superior justice to Afghan citizens?

While Mr. Karzai's government has set up an anti-corruption unit in the attorney general's office with just four prosecutors and an anti-corruption tribunal under the Supreme Court, these are far removed from the ground. Making some noises in Kabul won't make corruption go away. Unless the common man sees that corruption is being tackled in his local community, it will be business as usual.

Afghanistan needs a homespun version of the "broken windows" theory, in which small problems are addressed quickly to foster confidence in management's competency. Even the smallest act of corruption at the lowest level must be prosecuted robustly, and the guilty must be sentenced. This will send a powerful message to the corrupt that there is a price to

pay for corruption and is likely to offer deterrence value. New York offers a telling lesson in this regard, and there is no reason why the same principle cannot work in Afghanistan.

Corruption is only one battleground. Afghanistan cannot be secured without offering alternatives to poppy cultivation for its farmers. Conventional counternarcotics strategies are unlikely to work and often push the farmers into criminal hands. Unless a green revolution at the grass-roots level makes a sustainable agricultural income feasible, the Taliban will continue to be well-funded. Regional models - from India, for example - can be adopted to make legitimate agriculture profitable. While subsidies and intensive government support at the village level will be needed in the immediate term, over time, as farmers are weaned away from the poppy trade, results will become evident.

It also is time to ditch Mr. Karzai. For decades, U.S. strategy in the region has been built on a succession of unstable individuals. Ranging from the peculiar obsession with Gen. Muhammad Zia ul-Haq and Gen. Pervez Musharraf in Pakistan to President George W. Bush's sustained endorsement of Mr. Karzai, U.S. engagement in Afghanistan and Pakistan has been oriented toward individuals rather than focused on the political system.

As the experience with Pakistan shows, investing entirely in just one person is highly risky. This is especially true when the person is deeply unpopular, corrupt and prone to becoming unpredictable. Taint by association is natural - the Pentagon's report concedes that Afghan perceptions about corruption place blame on the international community in addition to their own government.

Mr. Karzai is following in the footsteps of other inglorious puppets. History shows that these individuals, fed on a staple diet of U.S. support, inexorably stifle competition and create a situation where there is no alternative to relying upon them. Starting with desperate pleas for support - as with Mr. Karzai eight years ago - their demands grow progressively more unpalatable. Ultimately, they cling to power on their terms by convincing the U.S. that it has no choice but to rely upon them.

This myth must be busted. Mr. Karzai cannot be the sole guarantor of success in Afghanistan. Part of the problem is that the current strategy in Afghanistan is too Kabul-centric. President Obama must look beyond Mr. Karzai and push for devolution of power to downstream political institutions. This will yield a fresh crop of leaders who can offer alternative visions for Afghanistan. Moreover, cultivating friends more widely will ensure that Afghanistan does not regress into an anti-American state in the aftermath of an inevitable withdrawal.

The United States must not make this mistake again. In addition to pushing Mr. Karzai to combat corruption, it must undertake capacity-building at the local level. This begins with the creation of a strong federal system with power being transferred to states. Federalism is hardly a novel idea: It is the foundation of U.S. constitutionalism and is jealously guarded by the states. Strong states and local politics have ensured that U.S. politics is not the preserve of

Washington. It has offered up a steady stream of feisty state governors for national office, enriching voter choice.

Afghanistan needs this idea to be sown deeply into its political soil. Devolution of power offers a more palatable alternative to the calls for partitioning Afghanistan. It will also make Mr. Karzai focus on delivering good governance to his people if he wants to stay in power. Now is the time to bell this cat.

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