The recent military victory by the US and British forces in Iraq and its immediate aftermath of political chaos and uncertainty in that ‘liberated’ nation brings an added urgency to addressing the problems of post-conflict governance in these multi-ethnic societies in the region. Explanations for these repeated political failures after military triumphs are both numerous and highly contentious. Suggestions for possible strategies to break out of the ongoing military-political impasse, while not as numerous, have been equally dyspeptic and strongly partisan not only among Afghan leaders and members of the ethnic and regional communities, but also among a growing cadre of international ‘experts’, as well as an occasional interested American politician. Remarkable, however, in these discourses (especially among Afghans) are two things: an overwhelming convergence of opinions about the objectives for a desirable political outcome in Afghanistan, and conflicting views on how and by what political means to accomplish them. The disagreements on the means and political strategies for realizing the national goals are becoming increasingly sharp, especially among those in Kabul and the powerful regional actors. These divergent centre-periphery political perspectives are informed by significantly different perceptions of national and local interests among the contenders.

Mismatched strategies

The Afghan state, like many other post-colonial states, was constituted on the basis of the old dynastic person-centred model of sovereignty in which the ruler exercised absolute power. The rulers, whether under the monarchy, Daoud’s royal republic, the Khalq-Parcham Marxists, or the Mujahideen and Taliban regimes, and currently Chairman Karzai, have all attempted to rule over the country and its inhabitants as subjects rather than citizens. They have done so by relying on the use of force and maintaining/building a strong national army and police, complemented by their power to appoint and dismiss all government officials at will. Such a concentration of power has led to practices of which the outcomes have been nothing but tragic. Some of the more noteworthy of these legacies (earlier addressed in ISIM Newsletter 6, pp. 20–1) include the following: pervasive political mistrust between the rulers and their subjects, which has led to the general erosion of trust as a ‘social capital’ in Afghan society beyond the circles of immediate family, close kin, and ethno-linguistic/sectarian communities; commoditization of loyalty due to corruption, nepotism, and cronyism within a political economy of dependency and patron-client ties; exploitation of Islam (and other convenient ideologies) to preserve self-interest and the privileges of family, tribe, or ethnic group; and political marginalization and alienation of women and the so-called minorities (but also some Pashtun clans and tribes), who were often treated as mere ‘inter-nal-colonial’ subjects, complemented with some degree of contempt, especially on the part of certain government officials.

One of the most disastrous consequences of the century of rule from Kabul was the onset of the Marxist coup of 1978, and the subsequent national turmoil that culminated in the rise of the Taliban. This form of tribal-based paternalistic state politics has produced other equally pernicious legacies, which if left unaddressed in the new Constitution could have considerable negative impact on the promises of building democratic governance in the country. Unfortunately, the persistent demands from the leaders of the current Transitional Administration to re-establish the central government rule throughout the country – i.e. by means of building another large and expensive national standing army and police – seem wrongheaded at best, and disastrous at worst. According to a ‘Sneak Preview’ of the recently completed draft of the Constitution, by Amin Tarzi, in the RFE/RL Afghanistan Report (Vol. 2, No. 4, 24 April 2003), the Constitutional Drafting Commission has adopted, with very minor alterations, the 1964 Constitution of Afghanistan and submitted it to Chairman Karzai as the new Draft Constitution of the country for further study and discussions.

Any reasonable solution to the problem of future governance in Afghanistan must address at least three sets of domestic concerns: from the perspective of the war-weary and impoverished masses, especially the internally displaced and the returning refugees; from the perspective of those who hold (or aspire to) power in the capital, Kabul, and wish to expand their control over the rest of the country; and from the perspective of the local and regional leaders and their supporters who wish to retain their autonomy from the centre and ensure a significant stake in the future governance, reconstruction, and development of the country.

For the overwhelming majority of ordinary Afghans, the most pressing problem has been, and will remain, a general sense of physical insecurity in their homes, neighbourhoods, and the national highways and roads in many parts of the country, especially in the eastern and southern regions along the Pakistan borders. In view a recent study by a World Bank team which points to a growing recognition that ‘there can be no peace without development and no development without peace’ (http://econ.worldbank.org/prr/CivilWarPRR), a way must be found in Afghanistan to break the vicious cycles of violence and poverty. The resolution of the twin problems of peace and development is, however, contingent to a large measure upon the actions of the international community in conjunction with the Afghan leadership, at both the national and local levels.

Since they are currently unable to implement their strong centralized state project militarily, the Transitional Administration in Kabul is feverishly trying to accomplish the re-centralization of the government by financial, administrative, and judicial means through the activities of the powerful Ministries of Finance and Interior, and the Supreme Court. The mechanisms employed so far (with some degree of success) include: the introduction of new banknotes and centralization of the banking institutions, coupled with the demand by the Ministry of Finance (and Chairman Karzai) that all revenues from customs duties collected at the border ports be forwarded to the central treasury. The Ministry of Finance has been, however, less successful in centralizing control of the flow of international assistance by the donor nations
who prefer to spend their funds through the multitudes of internation-
al NGOs operating all across the country with the help of local and re-
gional authorities. The Ministry of Interior and the Supreme Court are
trying to accomplish their centralization projects by utilizing the best
weapon within the arsenal of person-centred sovereignty-based rule –
the appointment of loyal governors, other minor officials, and judges –
in those provinces where they can do so. Chairman Karzai’s virtual con-
trol over the appointments of the nine-member Constitutional Draft-
ing Committee and the thirty-five-member Constitutional Commission
may prove to be yet another powerful means for re-enshrinement of
the strong centralized state by preventing the consideration or discus-
sion of federalism or some other form of decentralization as alternative
forms of governance in the new draft Constitution of Afghanistan. Un-
fortunately for Afghanistan, the current Transitional Administration’s
centralization project may prove to be extremely costly, both econom-
ically and in socio-political opportunities. Even if successful, such a
project will only further aggravate the bedevilling problems of nation-
al security as well as the mounting ethnic and regional tensions within
the country.

From subjects to citizens

In order to pave the way for peace and development in Afghanistan,
the international community, together with the leadership of the Afghan
Transitional Administration, and the local and regional leaders must be
willing, at the minimum, to do three things, the first of which is to
abandon the assumption that security may be obtained only by means
of a large national army and police force. Instead, they ought to start
thinking that security is fundamentally a problem of deteriorating trust
as a valued social capital in Afghan society. Second, they should be
willing to move away from the old and oppressive practices of person-
centred sovereignty-based rule over an emasculated body of mistrust-
ing subjects, and to become political managers and civil servants who
are governing an empowered community of citizens. And third, they
should adhere to and practice the tried and tested principles of com-

munity self-governance by means of elections and/or recruitment and
hiring of civil servants rather than their appointment and dismissal by
the rulers at all levels of government administration.

In the tense environment of a post-9/11 world, and in a war-ravaged
and heavily armed Afghan population, it is not surprising that the lead-
ers of the Transitional Administration see security solely in terms of
building a strong military and police force to declare war on their real
or imagined enemies. Such was also done by the USA after the 9/11 at-
tacks. Even with the enormous firepower of the US Armed Forces, the
war on terrorism is far from over, and US military victory remains in
doubt, despite declarations to the contrary. More importantly, the ‘war
on terrorism’ has not improved the sense of security for the American
citizens at home or abroad. The reason for this lack of reassurance in
winning this war may be the fact that the root causes of terrorism, which
are fundamentally political, are utterly ignored or denied.

More than two decades of war and communal strife fuelled by hate
and suspicion, not only towards the government but also between vari-
ous ethnic and tribal communities, has brought the level of general
trust within and between communities in Afghanistan to its absolute
minimum. Contemplating more war by the central government
against those whom they sometimes call the ‘warlords’ – a verbal
weapon crafted by the Pakistani ISI in reference to those who resisted
the Taliban conquest of their territories – will only produce more hate
and violence. More importantly, the leaders of Afghanistan should take
note of the historical fact that a strong national standing army, even
when it was maintained at a huge cost, did not only defend the coun-
try; it also ‘invited’ the Soviet invasion of 1979. The creation of the
70,000-strong national army currently contemplated, at even greater
financial cost, will be again a source of temptation by the rulers to be
used against their own citizens as was done in the past.

However, there is a viable alternative to improve national defence
against foreign enemies, as well as to boost internal security while lay-
ing important foundations for building communal trust. The verbal
weapons of ‘warlord’ and ‘warlordism’, so widely used by the media,
government officials, some researchers, and most ‘experts’ on the af-
fairs of the country, should be abandoned. A concerted effort must be
made to work with local rural communities to officially form and regis-
ter community-based national defence units. This does not, however,
mean that there is no need for a national army and police or a central
government. Rather, it requires diligence in making a systematic as-
nal attempt of how to recognize appropriate governing structures in
which the roles, powers, and responsibilities of the central, regional,
provincial, and local governing bodies are clearly defined and the nec-
essary institutional means (such as the appropriate size of the national
army and police force) are made available to exercise their requisite
powers and to fulfill their governance obligations. The establishment of
such a viable state structure capable of stabilizing the country for na-
tional reconciliation and reconstruction requires further wisdom in en-
shrining the principle of community self-governance through elec-
tions and/or recruitment of the civil servants. Adopting community
self-governance will be a crucial step toward a fair and equitable treat-
ment of all ethnic, regional, and tribal groups alike. This will be possible
only when a properly designed and organized complete census of the
country’s population is taken and appropriate demographic standards
are established for organizing administrative units and electoral con-
stituencies.

The opportunity is here, and the expectations, of both the battered
peoples of Afghanistan and a caring and concerned international com-
unity, are very high. Are the leaders of Afghanistan ready to embark
on a new and alternative political course which could transform the
constitutive principles of governance in order to lay the foundation for
a gradual and healthier change in the political culture of Afghan soci-
ety? The Afghan leaders at both the centre and the periphery, the opin-
ion makers at home and abroad, and the international advisors and an-
alysts must steer clear of the sterile debates about federalism, war-
lordism, and the like. What requires close examination and adoption is
a clear set of constitutive governance principles, which could truly help
transform the impoverished masses of Afghan subjects into loyal and
responsible citizens of their own communities – as well as a peaceful
Afghan state. Such a set of democratic governance principles must re-
ject and put an end to the possibility of reverting to the familiar pat-
terns of person-centred politics, and of sovereign rulers with their cadre of kin and cronies holding on to power. It is for the sake of future
generations, and in the hope of eliminating from Afghanistan and the
world one of the principle political causes of terrorism – the sovereign-
ty-based oppressive militaristic regimes in multi-ethnic states – that
the leaders of Afghanistan must display the requisite wisdom and dili-
ence to enshrine the right set of governance principles in the new Constitution of Afghanistan.

To do otherwise will mean the loss of a truly gold-
en opportunity for the people of Afghanistan, the
region, and the world.

Notes
1. Shahrahi, Nazif M., ‘Resisting the Taliban and Talibanism in Afghanistan: Legacies of
a Century of Internal Colonialism and Cold War Politics in a Buffer State’, Perception:
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a Century of Internal Colonialism and Cold War Politics in a Buffer State’, Perception:

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An armed Afghan man watches a wrestling match at Kabul’s only stadium.

Image not available online