

Idealism killing Karzai

Anthony Bubalo

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Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai has joined an elite club of political leaders in conflict-ridden societies of the Middle East and South Asia. Like Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) in the Palestinian territories and Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq, he has been embraced to the point of (political) death by erstwhile supporters in the West.

Initially lionised by the West as their countries' best liberal hopes, these leaders are eventually condemned as weak, ineffective and illiberal when they do not deliver what we had hoped.

The result is not always the same. It is not yet clear whether the West's fickle championing of Karzai will prove to be politically fatal; in Abu Mazen's case it has simply been debilitating. Maliki, however, survived it, emerging as a stronger leader than anyone had expected.

In all these cases, however, there is a common process. First, we embrace these leaders so tightly that we lend weight to charges that they are stooges of the West. Second, we grow impatient at their inability to achieve the unrealistic goals we set or to overcome the obstacles to which we frequently contribute. Finally, we rail against them publicly, assuaging domestic critics of our own ill-considered policies but condemning these leaders in their highly honour-bound societies.

All of this is evident in the West's treatment of Karzai. Initially he was the urbane, articulate Pashtun in whom we overinvested our hopes that he might build a stable and democratic Afghan state from scratch, sorting through its myriad problems and conflicts at the same time.

Then we became disillusioned, leery, for example, of the odious and corrupt company Karzai was keeping.

We ignore that his reliance on warlords, among whom were personal tormentors from his past, was a result of the West's tardy and unfulfilled promises of military and financial support; or that we, too, had relied on many of the same people to topple the Taliban.

Now in an election many observers predicted would be flawed, we express our shock at his fall from grace. We shoehorn him between a powerful US senator and the head of the UN mission in Afghanistan to publicly declare his agreement to a second round of the election, hoping that by calling him a statesman we may somehow ameliorate his loss of face in front of his own people.

So amid the revulsion -- justified and self-righteous -- at the vote rigging, we just may want to cut Karzai some slack for at least three reasons.

First, Karzai's belief that Washington is out to get him may be paranoia, but even the paranoid have real enemies. While it is probably true the Obama administration never took a formal decision to sideline Karzai, it did little to reassure him by toying with alternatives in the lead-up to the election. Indeed, Karzai is fighting not just rivals and insurgents inside Afghanistan. Outside the country he is second-guessed by Western officials who often rely on diaspora figures and international experts, not all of whom are entirely dispassionate in their advice.

Second, if a further round is held, Karzai will probably win. But even if forced into a coalition with his main rival Abdullah Abdullah, he will likely remain a key player in Afghan politics. Whatever the Obama administration decides to do in Afghanistan, it will need to rebuild its relationship with Karzai and help him rebuild his relationship with his people.

The administration may be convinced to bypass the national level.

There seems to be a line of thought in US counter-insurgency planning, for example, that argues governance can be built from the ground up at the provincial and district levels (in contrast to the initial top-down approach that was taken).

But even a very casual observer of Afghan politics like me can see that everyone from Karzai to the Taliban and neighbouring states such as Pakistan and Iran have far better insights and levers into local politics than our troops and political advisers ever will.

The idea that, on our own, we can outmanoeuvre all of these actors locally is laughable.

Finally, Afghanistan does genuinely need the West's help, and I believe that we have a genuine interest in helping. But right now what Afghanistan does not need is the liberal conceit of our governments, our media and our non-government organisations.

As noted by Steve Coll, an astute observer of politics in South Asia and Washington, in debating its policy choices the Obama war cabinet "barely refers to Afghan leaders by name", focusing instead on arguments about legitimacy and governance as if the Taliban was primarily motivated by the Rights of Man.

This is not to say that we should leave Afghanistan's democratic development to some later date. But we should be patient and sensitive, recognising what is politically and culturally possible, helping to create a secure environment for Afghanistan's political evolution. What we should avoid is a rush to judge leaders who are grappling with broken societies by the standards we don't always reach in our own.

Anthony Bubalo is program director for West Asia at the Lowy Institute for International Policy.