

Jirgas And The Taleban - Hamid Karzai Interview

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Afghan President Hamid Karzai spoke to the BBC News website's guest columnist Ahmed Rashid in his first interview since last week's dinner in Washington with US President George W Bush and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf.

Can you elaborate on your idea of a jirga between the Pashtun tribes of Pakistan and Afghanistan?

I am thinking of a meeting between the Afghan civil society, Afghan elders, tribal chiefs, ullema, clergy and Afghan spiritual leadership plus the intellectuals. From the Pakistan side I am hoping for the same thing and it should be a gathering of the people from one end of the Afghan border with Pakistan to the other end of the Afghan border with Pakistan. They would meet together.

But that could mean thousands of people?

It need not have thousands of people. You can have a joint committee from both sides, from the groups and personalities who would sit down and choose the membership and the mechanism.

How would you determine the membership?

We generally know and the criteria would be the same for both sides. A joint commission would be good, not just at the government level but at the people's level. Afghan parliamentarians would also be involved [as well as] all the institutions that Afghanistan has had traditionally and the [new] democratic institutions of the country.

The jirga is the biggest and oldest of such traditions. The current institutions like the Senate and the Parliament would all be involved.

There is criticism that in a way you are going backwards, back into tribalism, that you are undermining the institutions built in the past four ways?

No not undermining them, but in fact reinforcing them and reinvigoration them and involving them in matters of the country. Civil society in Afghanistan has been undermined for the past 30 years, against our elders and intellectuals and clergy. There has been a systematic campaign of weakening them. And against civil society there has been a systematic campaign of bringing in the most radical elements by force or money and with support from outside.

The same thing has happened on the Pakistani side, especially in the Pashtun territories. The traditional secular Pashtun leadership of Pakistan has been undermined systematically and violently. The killing of 150 Pashtun leaders in North Waziristan in the past two years is a clear indication of that. The strengthening of the radicals that give support to terrorism or are involved in terrorism, this has to stop. This can only stop if we support civil society.

Is there not a risk that Pakistan would nominate the Taleban or the Jamiat-e-Ullema Islam (JUI) rather than real Pashtun elders. How would you prevent such a thing from happening?

A jirga means representative and those [who are] not representative cannot be there or called to attend. Nobody can fake a jirga in Afghanistan, the elements are known and I hope there will be similar transparency on the Pakistani side. If proper representation does not come from the Pakistani side it will not help anything and so genuine representation is needed. If the JUI is coming and if they represent the people they are

welcome, then they can call for any issue to be discussed and let the debate determine the truth.

Afghanistan and especially the Pashtuns in Pakistan and the Balochis as well, are suffering and this has to end. They are suffering at the hands of terrorists who we strongly believe are imposed on the communities there, that they have become hostage to the extremists.

For the sake of the security of Pakistan and Afghanistan and world security which is threatened from what is happening here, it is imperative we get together and use the help of the population to end the crisis. If the crisis gets worse Pakistan is not going to be safe and it won't be confined to just the Pashtun territories but go beyond that as well.

No country can gain nowadays from weakening the other country. It will work if the other side plays sincerely.

Do you trust the Pakistani military regime to bring about a transparent jirga?

The lack of transparency will show itself immediately, so there is only one way and that is transparency. It is like bringing a professor of some subject to a classroom and he will show immediately if he can teach the subject or not. You cannot fake a jirga, it has to be true. You can rig an election, you can undermine and intimidate people, but you cannot rig a jirga.

Would you ask for any international monitoring for this jirga?

It has become an international question as well. The bombings around the world and Afghanistan and Pakistan as well and the loss of life, show that terrorism is caused by what was going on in this region and the free hand given to extremist elements. If we don't end it, the crisis will continue and Pakistan and Afghanistan will be the negative focus of the rest of the world, so it is in the interest of the international community to participate with us. But mostly it is for us to decide with wisdom so this proposal will be taken well.

What is happening in [the Pakistani city of] Quetta with the allegations that the Taliban leadership is based there?

The focus of the jirga will be on those issues from our side no doubt, because the people of Quetta are also suffering. The focus will be on terrorism in whatever form it is.

I have raised in a very clear way the question of terrorism and sanctuaries and that no country, no government can rely on the use of extremism as an instrument of policy. If this continues, the suffering in Afghanistan will not end.

No ethnic group or nation in the world is by its own nature radical. Extremism makes them suffer. That's why governments must stop using this. Afghanistan's stability and peace and prosperity is in the interests of Pakistan. There may be some who feel in the government of Pakistan that Afghanistan's prosperity is going to draw away the sympathies or the loyalties of the people there But that is an old story. That is a colonial type of thinking.

A modern Afghanistan and Pakistan should be two countries who live in peace and prosperity with each other. Therefore nobody needs to rely on extremism for self-protection or for the weakening of the other side. This jirga will give an assurance to the government of Pakistan that Afghanistan's peace and prosperity is also good for them.

Are you worried about the growing anti-Pakistan feeling amongst ordinary Afghans?

I am very much worried and I have told President Musharraf as well, that the Afghan people are getting very angry and he should see how dangerous this is, especially Afghanistan's Pashtun belt is becoming very angry at what is coming from Pakistan. I hope they understand that it's not good for relations between the two countries.

You have been under a lot of personal criticism recently. Five years on there is the lack of capacity in the government, poor governance, corruption, drugs - a long list of things. Are you rethinking your strategy?

Capacity is not something I can deal with overnight, it means human resources which need development. You need education and young people trained and educated and capacity building will take time. Borrowed capacity we are already using but it is not very effective. We need time for that. We are trying to create public institutions.

Corruption is a problem, but not the kind of problem that is spoken about. We must work against it and we have just appointed a commission headed by the chief justice working on various means of reducing corruption. The attorney general has taken a lot of measures against corruption.

We are not weak in moving against drug traffickers, but that is depending on our capacity. We have delivered drug dealers to the US and we will continue to do that.