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The Karzai calculus, by David Ignatius

Reform may be a matter of survival

With the reelection of President Hamid Karzai, if that's the right word for a process that featured fraudulent balloting and a canceled runoff, the United States now confronts the hardest puzzle of all about Afghanistan: How to improve governance--

which most experts agree is essential to defeating the Taliban--

without taking even more control from Afghan officials? President Obama took the first step on this tight rope Monday with a congratulatory phone call to Karzai that was at the same time a backhanded slap. He urged the Afghan president to launch "a much more serious effort to eradicate corruption. &quot; Karzai responded Tuesday by promising that, in unspecified ways, he would eradicate this stain. It's a classic American dilemma: How does a superpower fix problems in a faraway country without dictating policies in a way that ultimately enfeeble the very people we are trying to help? Over the years we've gotten this wrong in Vietnam, the Middle East and Latin America.

The governance issue comes up in nearly every conversation with U.S. officials in Afghanistan. The problem is partly the corruption and inefficiency of the Karzai government, and partly the primitive state of Afghanistan's legal and political institutions. It's the weakness the Americans most want to fix, but where they are least certain about the solution. Many favor a dramatic U.S. intervention that forces Karzai to make the necessary reforms. But some U.S. policymakers fear that such an attempt to impose policies will only make matters worse--

by offending Afghans and undermining the country's fragile efforts at self-

government. "The idea that you can just order Karzai around is wrong," insist

some senior U.S. officials. "He has to feel that it's his idea." Various proposals are

circulating for how to tackle the governance mess. One suggestion is a "council of elders," including prominent Afghans and international figures, to assist Karzai. Another idea is a top consultative position, a national security and economic adviser. A third proposal would gather a new constitutional convention to widen the political circle and write new rules for governance. But is Karzai capable of reform? Some American experts argue that Karzai's government is, in effect, a criminal enterprise with billions of dollars at stake in the status quo. Customs fees collected privately at the Torkham Gate crossing into Pakistan total an estimated \$13 million a month. Then there's skimming from the billions in military and economic aid. And finally, there's the narcotic trade, from which sophisticated cartels rake in several billion dollars a year.

The corruption helps fuel the Taliban insurgency--

not just through illicit revenue but by discrediting American talk about the rule of law. The Taliban's appeal at the grass-roots level, experts warn, comes from the fact that it offers a austere contrast to the Mafia-

like network in Kabul and its American backers. In visits last week to a half-

dozen U.S. bases, I heard plans for improving local governance at every stop. U.S. soldiers and aid workers are meeting in weekly "shuras" with local, district and provincial councilsto hear what people want.

But one American aid coordinator cautions that right now, the linkages between these local efforts and the national government are "nonexistent."

Creating "good governance" projects is a growth industry in Afghanistan. Every briefcase has a pitch about how his unit is building trust and enabling local decision-

makers. But frankly, there's an air of unreality to some of these representations. There's a plan to train 10,000 competent Afghan civil servants annually, and another to recruit 3,500 honest policemen every month, and a third to nearly double the monthly recruits into the Afghan army. Plans call for mobilizing 32 percent of the available military-

ages males. But settings such targets in a PowerPoint slide and achieving them are two different things.

When the United States goes to war on the scale it has done in Afghanistan, it creates a kind of alternate reality. America is so big and powerful (and often, arrogant) that most people go with the flow and let Uncle Sam do it. A defiant few protest the foreign occupation with roadside bombs and suicide vests. That's the syndrome of dependency and rage that the United States now faces in Afghanistan--

and must break. The best message for Karzai is the truth: Unless he improves governance, the massive American effort won't last more than another year. We can't do it for him. For the Karzai regime,

thepoliticalcalculusisbrutallysimple:It'sreformordie.</p>  
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