

The West needs to open itself to the potential of Tribal Solutions In resolving the conflict in Afghanistan

by

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Last month, Prince Ali Seraj announced his intention to run as President of Afghanistan. The third set of Presidential elections since the fall of the Taliban are scheduled for August this year. Seraj is a large man with hooded eyes and a dark beard; the image of his forebear, Abdur Rahman who inherited a broken Afghanistan in 1880, at the end of the Second Anglo Afghan War. Back then the British, having failed to stabilise the country, were desperate to leave. They installed Rahman and the 'Iron Amir' used a combination of force and guile to cement things back together. Today, the West should take the candidacy of his great, great, grandson Prince Ali Seraj, seriously.

After seven years and billions of wasted dollars we risk failure in Afghanistan. The population is disaffected with the corruption of the Karzai regime and angered by mounting civilian casualties. With many returning to the fold of the Taliban, the outlook for both Afghanistan and Pakistan is meltdown. In response to this alarming scenario the Obama administration has released a 'Plan' for dealing with the alarming situation in the region. Among other things, this involves a surge of 17,000 troops and the provision of more 'civilian advisors' to mentor and train Afghan security forces and at provincial and regional level to foster 'governance' (a concept that, after eight years, has achieved little except multiple layers of legislation and contradiction, while in reality power remains vested with strongmen).

The problem is that Afghan history shows that more troops will encourage more resistance. The effect is likely to be a further degeneration of security, and a fanning of the conflict deeper into Pakistan. At the current rate of decline, support for Coalition forces will have evaporated by 2010, leaving us with the prospect of nationwide jihad; a situation similar to that faced by the Russians and far more serious than the political movement masquerading as a religious movement that we are now facing.

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The key to solving Afghanistan is internal. Lord Roberts of Kandahar recognised this when, at the end of the second Afghan war in 1880 he said, *'the less they are able to see us, the less likely they are to hate us.....we will have much greater chance of getting the Afghans on our side if we abstain from any interference in their internal affairs whatsoever.'*

In Afghanistan 'internal' means 'tribal'. But since 2001 the tribal option is one we have utterly failed to grasp. Instead, we have stuck with what we know; installing 'western friendly' technocrats to run things, and equating 'success' with 'western metrics': i.e., swiftly punctuated elections (despite a lack of concurrent reform needed to support the democratic process), an ill-conceived military campaign and 'reconstruction' that has too often been more about buying 'force protection' for Coalition troops than the longer term needs of Afghans. There has been virtually no meaningful dialogue with the tribes.

The Taliban has been successful because it has been able to exploit the gap between Hamid Karzai's government and the tribes, who make up roughly 90% of Afghanistan's population (there is no up to date census). People consider the government corrupt, inadequate and ambivalent to their needs. This, coupled with pitiful progress since 2001 on reform of the Afghan justice sector and the fact the Afghan National Police are seen as endemically corrupt has given the Taliban the possibility to present themselves as a better alternative. As with their spectacular rise to power during the early 1990's, the Taliban have been able to represent themselves as providers of law and order and their politicised version of Sharia as Islamic law. This has enabled them to penetrate vast areas of the country.

Neither has it helped that the Pashtuns, despite making up the bulk of the population, have pretty much been sidelined politically since 2001. This and a lack of meaningful efforts at serious reconciliation with the Taliban have also made fertile recruiting ground for the religious zealots.

Another problem has been terminology. For since 2001 the word 'tribal,' has too often been (wrongly) equated with 'Taliban.' This fudging of reality reflects the unwillingness of those interest groups who since 2001 have taken power (largely 'ceded' to them by the West during the bombing campaign to displace the Taliban) to accommodate the Pashtun majority. Dominated as they have been by Northern Alliance 'Tajik' warlords, this group tends to brand anything 'tribal' as 'Taliban' since they realise that much of the tribal constituency is in the South, where their historic 'enemy' Pashtun tribes are concentrated.

There have been many definitions of what 'tribal' actually means. Louis Dupree, in comparing a 'nation state' and an essentially 'tribal' society, says the former is

'in the western sense', ...more a set of attitudes, a reciprocal, functioning set of rights and obligations between the government and the governed – with emphasis on the individual rather than the group'.

Tribalism tends to come in, Dupree adds,

'In non literate societies...when kinship replaces government and guarantees men and women born into a specific unit a functioning set of social, economic, and political rights and obligations'.

Even when his tome 'Afghanistan' was published back in 1973, Dupree pointed out the tensions developing in Afghanistan between the concept of 'nation state' and a traditional society based on 'kinship'. Back in 1973, as arguably since 2001, Dupree says Afghanistan was attempting to create a nation state out of what he called, 'a hodge podge of ethnic and linguistic groups'.

We now know that this state of affairs set in motion the series of coups which turned Afghanistan from a Monarchy into a Republic and ended in the chaos of the Jihad.

Since then almost thirty years of war has destroyed much of Afghanistan's former social fabric. The Soviets targeted many of the elders and intellectuals who provided the 'glue' for jirgas and, since 2001, Afghans complain that relationships of trust between tribes have further fragmented as the Coalition has fostered hostility between groups. This has been done, among other ways, by the Coalition favouring strongmen over tribal leaders with more historic legitimacy and by pumping them up with weapons and cash. Overnight, such actions have changed patterns of power and kinship, causing instability.

But today there is hope on the horizon, if only western policymakers are prepared to see it. The National Coalition for Dialogue with the Tribes (NCDT) was founded in Spring 2004 as a national, non-political movement aiming to rekindle the cohesiveness that existed between tribes prior to the Soviet invasion.

It is this vehicle which could yet enable a stabilisation of Afghanistan. The NCDT has offices in every Province. Its Council members represent each tribe in the country. It was founded - with the financial support of its members - in response to the dis-affection many felt towards the so-called 'political parties' created during the jihad (in reality most are simply politico military factions led by warlords), who they blame for many of Afghanistan's woes.

The NCDT has selected Prince Ali Seraj to be their leader and want him to run for President. Seraj says this is to do with his lineage, for as well as Rahman, Seraj is descended from eight other Afghan Kings. His Grandfather was King Habibullah, who married thirty-two times, meaning Seraj can claim a 'Grandmother in every tribe.' Seraj is also a nephew of the immensely popular King Amanullah. It is to this family, rather than the line of Zahir Shah, whose father took the monarchy in a coup, to which the tribes have pledged allegiance.

Such bloodlines are invaluable in these days of disunity. Afghans, being generally conservative tend to gather around 'personalities' rather than political parties and many look back to the monarchy, particularly the reigns of Kings Amanullah and Habibullah, as a time of peace, since when there has been un-ending conflict and poverty. Hence the former monarchy is seen as a banner beneath which the tribes can unite.

Seraj's major accomplishment since his return to Afghanistan has been cultivating a relationship with the tribes, spending time listening to their concerns via the NCDT. I have attended some of his jirgas and seen that the relationship takes time, patience and enough compassion to be interested in their problems. When I was working on the Parliamentary elections in 2005 many of NCDT's members, encouraged indirectly by Seraj, came to voice their concerns about electoral intimidation, fraud and lack of security in their regions. I was amazed by the number of them and the distance they had travelled, from as far away as Badghis, Daikundi, Zabol, Farrah.

I have known Seraj since 2002. He is a colourful character, larger than life and a bit of a rough diamond. Although born and raised in Afghanistan he has connections with the U.S.A., where he lived for eighteen years, because he was educated at the University of Connecticut and married an Irish American catholic. They returned to Afghanistan during the 1960's and 70's when he set up several businesses in Kabul. But Seraj was forced to flee when the Khalk/Parcham coup occurred in 1978 and his cousin President Daoud was assassinated, ushering in an era of terror that ultimately led to the Soviet invasion. Seraj escaped in the back of a bus, hiding behind the hashish smoke of some hippies bound for Pakistan.

He then set up fibre optics businesses in the U.S.A. and Brazil, where he lived for five years. He returned to Afghanistan in 2001, since when he has undertaken mostly privately funded reconstruction projects, such as schools and clinics, avoiding politics.

The 'Tribal vote' Seraj says 'is nothing more than the vote of the people. We cannot separate the tribes from the rest of the people. They are the one and the same. We are not a political party. We are a social national movement of the people, by the people for the people.' As to his manifesto Seraj says, 'the golden principle of working with the tribes, whenever one can, applies to nearly all aspects of government – law and order, justice, the organisation and use of the police and military, defence strategy, reconstruction and aid. The failure to do so has been the main cause of our troubles and is why the Taliban, who *do* understand this principle and have followed it with unscrupulous vigour, have been able to expand so effectively'.

There are no figures at present breaking down how various tribes intend to vote. I realised when I was living with a family of tribal leaders in Jalalabad that the tribal people look to personalities or 'leaders' to represent them in Kabul. The family I was with had influence with tribes between the Khyber Pass and Kabul in the four Provinces which make up the 'Eastern Shura'. Hence I have heard the tribal people say to these leaders at jirgas 'We do not know Karzai, (as he is in Kabul) but we know you (as you are here), so tell us (for example) why the Americans did not take your permission before deciding to destroy our poppy crop ?'

The relationship between such a 'leader' and the tribes is a reciprocal one and based on trust. Hence, with respect to voting in the Presidential election, the tribesmen will discuss the candidates with their representative or leader and then vote in the way he decides or they decide on jointly.

To illustrate this I refer to a meeting a colleague had with a Kuchi leader upon the leader's release from the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, in 2005. My colleague asked him his feelings about the forthcoming Parliamentary elections. 'Ah,

elections is for young people' said the leader, while around him groups of elders sat grinning. 'So' asked my colleague, 'how do you think they'll vote?'. The old man looked him directly in the eye as though he were dumb, 'Of course they'll vote the way I tell them to!'

So, there may be a secret ballot but tribal voting is still 'block' voting. In this way kinship ties persist over and above the individualism of the 'nation state' which Dupree refers to.

Prince Ali Seraj should be taken seriously because he has a capacity to engage with the tribes and has *already* built up tribal support right across the country. Ken Guest, an Afghan analyst who first began covering Afghanistan in 1980 says, 'Because building trust takes time, it is preferable to find a leader who is *already* commanding tribal support. This would allow tribally supported defence planning to start at once and go into effect as soon as a new government takes office'.

Another Afghan watcher is Fayyaz Shah, a Pakistani Pashtun and member of the 'Tribal broadcasting network'. He says, 'Sardar Ali Seraj is probably the only hope for resolving the Pakistan Afghanistan political disparity and has the ability to reunify all the tribes in Afghanistan. He is bold enough to see eyeball to eyeball with the strongest commanders. Besides his Royal background he has already proved to be a remarkable networker among the Pashtuns as well as the Uzbeks, Tajiks and Hazaras. If the international community wants a settlement in Afghanistan Prince Ali Seraj is the key, the Obama Administration can turn this key for a Change'.

To understand why a leader with legitimacy among the tribes is significant one only has to look at the main problems currently facing Afghanistan. They were defined for me recently by Nasrullah Arsala, brother of the great resistance commanders Abdul Haq and Haji Abdul Qadir¹. Arsala has also spent several years fostering cohesiveness with a tribal shura in the East of the country, close to the Pakistani border. He has also recently declared his intent to run for the Presidential elections.

According to Arsala, Afghanistan's problems are fourfold. Firstly the gap between government and the people where the people no longer take responsibility for society because they feel dishonoured by the present government, secondly the challenge from the Taliban and other armed resistance, thirdly the lack of national unity (meaning certain politicians or strongmen can profit from distrust between various groups). And lastly the 'threat' from the former Mujahideen, men such as Abdur Rashid Sayyaf and Rabbani, who have been able to threaten destabilisation if they do not get what they feel is their due in terms of power. Nasrullah Arsala argued that the current, western-supported, Presidential contenders cannot solve these problems because they have *no* relationship with the tribes, *nor* background in Jihad, 'which still has its influence in society,' he said.

As regards dealing with the Taliban, Arsala says there can be no peace until there has been a meaningful reconciliation process and it is only those with a 'tribal'

background who will be trusted by the Taliban to do this 'because we fought with

¹ Vice President of Afghanistan during 2002, until his assassination in July 2002

many of their commanders against the Soviets.’

Seraj’s view is not dis-similar, ‘The Afghan Talibs’ he says, ‘are our own people and we can bring them into the fold without much problem.’ He adds that the Government can stop the encroachment of the Taliban only by working with the tribes, instead of against them because greater tribal cooperation will make the Government appeal to those Taliban nationalists (the Afghans) whose only real cause is a free and peaceful Afghanistan without the presence of foreign troops. It would also, Seraj believes, allow the government to be rid of foreign elements within the Taliban.

To counter the failure since 2001 to work with the tribes, Seraj proposes that to re-integrate the tribes back into a modern, democratic constitution there should be dual heads of state, with a President responsible for the tribes and a Prime Minister responsible for centralised government issues. This would enable a working relationship to be established with the tribes that could also be applied horizontally to solve problems such as defence, justice and the need to ‘seal’ the border from insurgents, with methods that have worked for centuries. For example Seraj believes that tribal leaders should retain control of justice issues in their areas while referring capital issues to a national civil court.

In terms of defence he says, ‘Obama’s ‘surge’ may be necessary, but only for a short time. Anything too long and we will attract undesirables from all over the world and extend the fight for a long time’.

He also believes the idea that tribal members assume responsibility for security in their own local areas to be a good one, in fitting with past tradition. Hence the tribes should be asked to help with security using the traditional ‘Arbakai’ system (tribal security force). The coalition should utilise the border tribal security forces saying, ‘leave the fighting to those who have defended Afghanistan against its enemies for centuries’. He says, ‘only a member of our family can unite the nation. Once united, we will call upon the tribes to form a security belt around the borders, especially the gateway to Afghanistan that is the loya Paktia. Once that is done, then no one can cross’.

Nasrullah Arsala reiterates this when he says, ‘...in Afghanistan direction comes ultimately from the rural areas, from the people (i.e., the tribes) of Hezarac and Khoghiani, (which are tribes in Nangarhar in the East of Afghanistan), not the cities’. They are the ones whose support we can count on. We can mobilise their support as we have spent time with them’.

Both Seraj and Arsala believe the West is already favouring the Afghan-American technocrats, Ahmad Jalali, former Minister of Interior under the Karzai government and Ashraf Ghani, the former Finance Minister under Karzai as its preferred candidates. The criticism is that they have spent rather too much time in Washington, D.C., U.S.A., and rather less with the tribes and mujahideen in fighting the anti-Soviet Jihad. Certainly Ghani has not spent much time in Afghanistan, particularly since leaving his position as Finance Minister in 2004. And Jalali in 2004 was involved in a public spat about his unwillingness to give up his U.S. passport to conform with the

new Afghan Constitution. Such incidents have left ordinary Afghans with the feeling that very few of their public figures are particularly committed to Afghanistan.

A criticism of Seraj may be his failure to have participated in the anti-Soviet jihad. But he says he worked behind the scenes to push for the U.S. to send Stinger missiles (the weapon that apparently turned the war towards the mujahiddeen'). In his favour though is the disaffection of many Afghans with so called 'Mujahideen', who many blame for rights abuses in the years following the Soviet pull-out.

Although the United States or the United Kingdom would never declare official backing for a candidate, Arsala is sceptical of the international community's involvement in the elections. 'To win the elections there are three parts of support a candidate needs, only one third comes from support of Afghans, the other two are the neighbours (.i.e, Pakistan) and the international community.'

So far Washington is reticent about whom it hopes will win the forthcoming Presidential elections. Karzai is not willing to go quietly. But a leading Afghan political figure told me recently, 'If Karzai stands, no-one else has a hope.' The reasons are that over the past eight years he has built up such an elaborate network of patronage (which includes those profiting from illicit activities) that his re-election will be virtually assured. Seraj echoes Arsala's concerns when he says angrily, 'We don't know how these people have the *nerve* to run for President when they are sitting in the U.S.A. still. They're spending so much money! Where does it come from?'

Arsala feels the West must re-visit its support for those candidates who are tainted by association with Karzai's regime for they will not, he believes, be able to garner the support needed from the tribes to face down Afghanistan's problems. Like Dupree, who in 1973 wrote,

'Unfortunately, many of the national leaders in the non western world have been educated in the West and have the individualistic conceptions of nation-state. These leaders look on attempts to perpetuate tribal prerogatives as anarchistic, arcaic and anti-unity'.

Arsala feels the West must re-think its strategy of supporting the 'western educated' technocrats.

Seraj says, 'We must understand the flaws in the present approach and acknowledge that the most effective way of achieving peaceful stability is not through fighting a war and supporting a weak government, but by talking and listening to the tribes and empowering tribal leaders.'

I am sure that Lord Roberts, who concluded, '*We must not be afraid of Afghanistan and would profit from it by letting it be the master of its own fate...*' would see the value in a man such as Prince Ali Seraj becoming its President.

Postscript: Since this piece was published, Prince Ali Seraj has resigned his intention to run for the Presidency citing the failure of a level playing field in the electoral process. Baryalai Arsalai, however, is still a Presidential Election Contender.

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