

Nov. 6 - Addressing Corruption in Afghanistan

Mr. CASEY: Mr. President, I rise today to talk about the aftermath of the elections debacle in Afghanistan.

President Hamid Karzai's first term was characterized by a cloud of corruption and mismanagement. In his speech on Tuesday, President Karzai promised to battle corruption and to build a government that includes elements of his political opposition. Our President, President Obama, said that Mr. Karzai's performance should be measured not in words but deeds. I believe this to be true, and I wish to offer some thoughts on how President Karzai can rebuild the confidence of the Afghan people as well as the international community.

I am afraid the time window for this new government will be very short, so President Karzai needs to move quickly and with resolve. We might ask, what are the markers by which we should measure the progress of this new Afghan Government? I believe there are at least five areas to review.

First: President Karzai intends to build a better legislative framework to combat corruption. This is good. But he has also said that corruption cannot be solved by replacing high-ranking officials. I could not disagree more with that assessment. With a host of government officials accused of corruption, we will not see a significant break with the past. A large part of battling corruption is removing the perception of corruption. Keeping these officials in place will only serve to fuel a commonly held perception that Mr. Karzai refuses to resolutely deal with this issue of corruption.

I echo President Obama's call for strengthening the country's anticorruption commission. The establishment of such a body is long overdue and could play a key role in rebuilding Afghanistan's trust in the legitimacy of the Karzai government. The CIA should not--should not--be cooperating with Wali Karzai. If we are serious about corruption, we should also be judged by our deeds and not our words.

There are ministries in Afghanistan that are in need of serious reform. The Interior Ministry, which oversees the police, must confront the corruption practiced by police officers on a daily basis. The Agriculture, Energy, and Private Development Ministries also require substantial reforms.

A second area to examine: President Karzai should move quickly to publicly distance himself from some of the more unsavory characters from his election campaign.

GEN Abdul Rashid Dostum, the Uzbek warlord, has been accused of terrible human rights violations for his role in detaining thousands of Taliban fighters who were suffocated in shipping containers. Mr. Karzai's Vice Presidential partner, Mr. Fahim, has been accused of drug trafficking.

I fully acknowledge and I think everyone in this body fully acknowledges that President Karzai has a difficult job of balancing a wide variety of Afghan power centers and ethnic groups. We

know that. But building a foundation for his country on such dubious grounds not only calls into question his judgment but seriously endangers the prospects for sustainable reform.

Third: Karzai should keep in place those who have competently fulfilled their responsibilities.

Most noteworthy, perhaps, is the Governor of Helmand Province, Governor Mangal, who continues to struggle on the front lines against the Taliban. I had the opportunity this past August to meet Governor Mangal and to spend some time with him. He is very brave, and he is very competent. I think President Karzai should understand that the American people expect Governors to be strengthened and not undermined. Mr. Karzai should empower provincial Governors and local leaders who have proven their ability to lead. At the national level, the Health Minister has also done a commendable job, and the Education Ministry has made some important strides.

We cannot tell Karzai whom to retain or dismiss in his new government, but these personnel decisions send a very strong signal to the Afghan people and the international community of where he intends to lead the country in the short term.

Fourth: President Karzai needs to take steps to improve the election process in Afghanistan.

Systemic and widespread fraud marred the 2009 election. President Karzai should call for an inquiry into the 2009 electoral process led by experts from Afghanistan and the international community. Parliamentary elections are scheduled for next year. Without a serious investigation and an effort to address the shortcomings of the electoral system, the elections in 2010 and in the future are at risk. Without clean electoral processes in place, the Afghan people will continue to question the legitimacy of their elected leaders.

Fifth and finally: The viability and legitimacy of this new Karzai government will be determined in large part by whom he decides to incorporate from the opposition.

While his main opponent, Abdullah, has said he will not join a unity government, there are competent people from his team who can play a constructive role in Afghanistan.

We want and need President Karzai as a reliable partner. I hope his reelection will provide the opportunity for a fresh start in Afghanistan, a start that is characterized by a commitment to good governance, political inclusion, and a realization that Afghanistan's future must be based upon the rule of law.

When I saw President Karzai in August just after the election, I implored him to confront these pressing issues and explained that the patience of the American people was not infinite--in fact, it grows shorter by the day.

The next few weeks will be pivotal. President Karzai can do so much to rebuild the confidence of the international community and the Afghan people in this short period of time. As President Obama determines our troop commitment to the Afghan theater, it must be done with a

confidence in Afghanistan's decision makers--a confidence that frequently does not often exist today.

President Karzai cannot let his golden hour pass. It is too important to the future of Afghanistan. It is too important to the Afghan people. Finally and most critically, it is too important for the American families who have lost loved ones in Afghanistan and have relatives currently serving in Afghanistan. The sacrifice made by U.S. troops and civilians working to bring stability and a democratic future to the country cannot be overstated or undervalued. This should be the starting point for any discussion with President Karzai.

I believe he has a solemn obligation to get this right, just as we have an obligation here in the Congress to get our strategy in Afghanistan right. There won't be just one way to do that. We will get it right only by vigorous debate, only by an honest dialog of the challenges we face.

But one of the most significant challenges, in addition to the obvious security challenge as well as the developmental challenges, is this central concern we have about governance. Governance in Afghanistan starts with President Karzai. He has an opportunity to demonstrate he is committed to these reforms on corruption, on the better delivery of services to his people, but he has not done very well in a lot of those measures in the recent past. He has to prove himself first and foremost to his own people that he is serious about these reforms, but I think he also has an obligation to our government and to the international community to demonstrate that he wants to get this right.