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October 1, 2009

“The Afghan Elections: Who Won What?”
Rep. Gary L. Ackerman, Chairman
House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia

I'd like to start with a somewhat rickety old joke:

"A politician, a minister and an economist are stranded on a deserted island and fall into a 40-foot steep, steep pit, with nothing to eat. The politician says, "Let's make a lot of noise and someone will hear us." The minister says simply, "Let's pray." The economist says, "Let's assume a 50-foot ladder."

The politician and the minister starve to death. The economist, I fear, was the only soul eventually rescued from that island, and sometime in 2002, was put in charge of American strategy for Afghanistan. I hold this suspicion because our strategy to date there could be summarized as, "Let's assume an effective Afghan government."

There is, of course, no such thing. Yes, they have a president. Yes, there are ministers and ministries. Yes, there are security forces. But to confuse these accessories of governance with an actual, capable effective government is to confuse Pinocchio with a real, live little boy. They might look alike, but the similarities stop there.

The Afghan government, after eight years of international sponsorship is a disaster. Its writ extends only as far as foreign troops can carry it. Its policemen are mostly thieves. Its troops still can not provide security to its people. Its ministries are mostly empty, and the ones that are staffed, often focus chiefly on graft. (Not fighting it, but pursuing it.) Much of its decision-making is non-deliberative, non-transparent and is mostly ineffective or not intended to benefit the public at large.

What was crafted in Bonn in 2002 as a grand bargain of governance has fallen apart. The people of Afghanistan, who have endured thirty years of warfare, salted with heavy doses of drought and misfortune, are thoroughly exhausted, but are still not supporters of the Taliban. But neither are they fans of the system that we and our allies have been propping up.

There is no strong center. There are few strong governors. There is almost no effective representation. There is little law and less justice.

Afghans are not only living in something akin to anarchy, but in a kind of conflict-saturated anarchy. And all the while they hear of the billions--\$38 billion from the United States alone—that is being poured into their desolate and desperate country. They must wonder, as I do, where has all the money gone? Notwithstanding the near complete absence of tangible or meaningful signs of success, or security, or development, we are not in year one of this conflict. We are in year eight.

Much as I wish the Obama Administration could have gotten a fresh start, there is in fact nothing fresh about our struggle in Afghanistan. Following the defeat of the Taliban in 2002, our efforts were underfunded, undermanned, under-thought and underappreciated. And well before President Obama even ran for the Democratic Party's nomination, the situation in Afghanistan was already moving sharply in the wrong direction.

The recent elections there have only served to bring the rot and decay into public view. Not surprisingly, many here are feeling a bit nauseated. The August elections were, in the words of current senior U.S. officials, intended to serve as “a critical step toward developing a government that is accountable to its citizens.” Instead, these elections served as a powerful demonstration of how corrupt and awful the Afghan government really is.

Congress has hard choices to make in the coming weeks and months about this conflict. To many, it appears strikingly similar to another conflict that wore on for many years before finally being cast off by an American public sick of war and unable to find either a believable strategy for winning it, or a convincing rationale for continuing it.

I would suggest, however, that there are some very significant differences between the war in Afghanistan and the war in Vietnam. But, perhaps, that is a subject for a different hearing.

The issue before us today can be thought of in three simple questions. With regard to the Afghan elections, one, what happened? Two, what is happening right now? And three, what are the implications of these events?

To answer these questions, we are fortunate to have with us a superb panel of true experts. Most of them were on the ground in Afghanistan during the elections and can report not only what they saw and heard but, more importantly, what it all might mean.

But first, the Ranking Minority Member.

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