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[Corruption--The Afghan Wild Card](#)



As the President and other senior administration leaders hunker down in a windowless basement room in the White House to begin debate on future U.S. policy in Afghanistan, one of the most vexing issues will be wide-spread Afghan corruption.

The profound problem, as articulated by the Administration's military and civilian leaders, can be simply stated. Corruption is a major cause of Afghan societal and governmental instability. Anticorruption efforts are critical to stability and legitimacy. Such governmental legitimacy is necessary to gain support of the divided, ethnically diverse people, and this support is a vital complement to military action against the Taliban. So, corruption must be swiftly and effectively addressed.

But-- and here it becomes vexatious-- how can this be done by a weak, corrupt government during a dangerous insurgency, especially after a contested election marked by serious fraud? And, if corruption is not effectively addressed in a short time frame, does this undermine -indeed checkmate--- the ultimate military mission as expressed by President Obama earlier this year to disrupt, dismantle and eventually defeat al Qaeda and prevent their return to Afghanistan by defeating the Taliban insurgency.

To understand the importance of the anticorruption effort in Afghanistan one need go no further than actually to read the recent report sent to the President by the U.S. commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal. Although the headline from the McChrystal report was his request for more troops, its deeper importance was his criticism of past U.S./NATO policy and his definition of the "problem."

Read his words on how central corruption is to his redefinition of the core issues which U.S. Afghan policy must address.

- "We face not only a resilient and growing insurgency; there is also a crisis of confidence among Afghans--in both their government and the international community---that undermines our credibility and emboldens the insurgents."
- "Our strategy cannot be focused on seizing terrain or destroying insurgent forces; our objective must be the population."
- "...[A] properly resourced strategy must be built on four main pillars....2. Prioritize responsive and accountable government...assist in improving governance at all levels....that the Afghan people find acceptable...on par with, and integral to, delivering security."
- "Criminality creates a pool of manpower, resources and capabilities for insurgents and contributes to a pervasive sense of insecurity among the people. Extensive smuggling diverts major revenue from [the Afghan government]. Criminality exacerbates the fragmentation of Afghan society....A number of Afghan Government officials, at all levels, are reported to be complicit in these activities, further undermining [government] credibility."
- "The most significant aspect of the production and sale of opium and other narcotics is the corrosive and destabilizing impact on corruption with the [government]. Narcotics activity also funds insurgent groups...".
- "There are no clear lines separating insurgent groups, criminal networks (including narcotics networks) and corrupt [government] officials. Malign actors within the [government] support insurgent groups directly, support criminal groups that are linked to insurgents and support corruption that helps feed the insurgency."
- "The narco- and illicit economy and the extortion associated with large scale developmental projects undermine the economy in Afghanistan. [The government] cannot funds its operations because of its inability to raise revenue, a situation made worse by the illicit economy."

McChrystal's assessment echoes analyses by many others. Afghanistan supplies 90 percent of the

world's opium and 30-50 percent of its economy is drug related. In 2005, Transparency International's annual Corruption Perception Index (built on its own surveys and on work by the World Bank, the Economist Intelligence Unit and others) ranked Afghanistan 117 out of 158 (with 158 the most corrupt) . By 2008, Afghanistan was 176th out of 180 on the Index. (Disclosure: I helped found Transparency International and am a member of TI-USA's board.)

A discussion draft on fighting corruption in Afghanistan prepared in 2007 by, among others, the World Bank, the UN Development Program, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime concluded after a review of governance indicators that "Afghanistan is fairly close to the bottom among countries in terms of the seriousness of the corruption problem."

The grave disconnect is that neither General McChrystal nor the Administration have articulated in meaningful detail how this cancer of Afghan corruption will be treated. McChrystal's report talks vaguely about improving transparency both in the Afghan government and in international assistance to Afghanistan (which, he says, is also rife with "corrupt and counterproductive practices.....too often [large development] projects enrich power brokers [and] corrupt officials"). He has all of one paragraph on rule of law. And he throws the problem over to a "cadre of civilian experts" who will be part of the build up.

Similarly, the Administration talks in general, conclusory terms about how to combat Afghan corruption . It recently sent to the Congress a draft of the "metrics" to be used in periodically assessing U.S. progress in Afghanistan (and Pakistan). A copy was published by Foreign Policy magazine. The measurements outlined in this short document are simply ends, not means: effectiveness of Afghan government in collecting revenues; public perceptions of Afghan rule of law at national, provincial and local levels; *demonstrable action by the government against corruption; successful interdiction and prosecution of high-profile narco-traffickers.*

So we are left with profound questions---which Administration policy makers must answer and Congressional and others must examine---about how it will address Afghan corruption. These more precise operational questions are of great importance because, as the last 50 years of post-colonial experience have shown, anticorruption, especially when it involves state capture and a strong kleptocratic class, is one of the most difficult and intractable problems in failing states like Afghanistan, which lack transparent, accountable and legitimate institutions to order political, economic and administrative affairs.

National aid programs (like those in the US and UK) or programs of international financing institutions (like the World Bank or the Asian Development Bank) or reformers in failed, failing and fragile states have all sought to address this intractable problem in the context of development agenda that focuses on both spurring economic growth and building institutional infrastructure. And there has been, of course, an outpouring of writing on anticorruption and development.

One conclusion is that processes are depend on each nation's history and culture, and they are slow, complex, fraught with difficulty and, thus far, often unsuccessful. Another conclusion is that anticorruption and broader development in failed states must start from within---outsiders can help but cannot command. Diverse writing from many disciplines elaborate these themes: development (e.g. Paul Collier, The Bottom Billion); economics (e.g. Dani Rodrik, One Economics, . Many Recipies: Globalization, Economics and Economic Growth); political science (Francis Fukuyama, State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century; multi-disciplinary (e.g. Robert Rotberg, ed., Corruption, Global Security and World Order).

If "accountable governance" based on effective anticorruption efforts is one of General McChrystal's and the Administration's "four pillars" of future Afghan policy (the others are better cooperation with Afghan forces, gain the initiative and focus resources), then the Administration must somehow defy the history of many poor states, address this issue with the right resources in the right places and explain its anticorruption strategy in credible, not conclusory, terms.

But there is substantial reason, in the Afghan setting, to think that this pillar cannot stand, that the symbol of the once and future Afghanistan is not an energized and legitimized government dispensing justice but the garish "narco-tecture" of drug lord homes standing amid the poverty of Kabul. And, if this is so, how do we craft, execute and justify a strategy that holds off the Taliban but, in effect, also protects corrupt Afghan instrumentalities of power.

Those discussions in the basement of the White House must be vexing indeed.

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