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NBC News

Karzai: a 'prisoner in his palace'?

By Ali Arouzi

08/02/2012



Afghanistan seems as fragile as ever. There is a sense that with the U.S.-led NATO draw-down expected in 2014 the country could slip back into some of its darkest most socially-restrictive and violent days.

Most Afghans you speak to in Kabul or outside of the capital fear that their country will once again be overrun by the Taliban or be engulfed by a civil war. And most of their criticism is aimed at President Hamid Karzai, who seems to have little control over the country outside of Kabul. (Of course, NATO troops – especially American forces – face scathing criticism as well).

Almost every province that immediately surrounds Kabul is firmly in the hands of the Taliban:

Logar, Wardak, Parwan, Kapisa, Laghman, and about 70 percent of Nangarhar are Taliban controlled, according to locals, and they all border Kabul.

I recently traveled to Charai Qamber, a small village just about five miles southeast of Kabul's city limits, to speak with locals and find out what they think of the security situation.

I asked Mohammad, one of the village elders who would only give his first name, what he thought of Karzai's control over the security situation in the country. Did he think he seemed more like the 'Mayor of Kabul,' rather than the president of Afghanistan? He roared with laughter and said, "Not even mayor!"

Life no better

Mohammad spoke about the president of his country with a tone of disdain. He said Karzai has done nothing for his village or for the country as a whole – instead, he had made a few cronies in Kabul rich.

While Mohammad said he did not like the Taliban, he thought his life was better before the U.S.-led invasion and Karzai's rule. He also believed Karzai had only given the veneer of semi-stability in Kabul, but that it was beginning to show major cracks.

In the same village I spoke to a man named Babur, which means happiness, but he seemed far from it.

Babur, who also only gave his first name, had a litany of complaints. He bemoaned the fact that his village had never been visited by an Afghan or American government official – despite the fact that there was a U.S-funded military academy just a mile away from the village, which should have provided much needed jobs, but had not.

Nor did he have a sense of security, even though they were just a few miles away from Kabul where there are checkpoints everywhere and heavily armed security forces.

He also complained that his village did not have electricity or running water – villagers have to walk half a mile to a well near the academy. He spoke with contempt about America but seemed to be fond of Iran and Pakistan. Not a good sign for winning hearts and minds.

Taliban country

The village of Charai Qamber where I chatted with Mohammad and Babur is just about 10 miles away from the site of a horrific public execution, reportedly by the Taliban, of a woman accused of adultery in early July.

Video of the woman's execution outraged Afghans and the world alike – particularly since it was so close to Kabul.

I saw one woman listening to my conversation with the men and I asked her about the woman's murder in the nearby village.

She would not give her name and only spoke to me reluctantly. She said that in Kabul it is tolerable for women to go outside. But she added that where she lives, women don't stand a chance and are at the mercy of the Taliban.

We tried to travel to Parwan province – its borders are just about six miles outside of Kabul. But because it is controlled by the Taliban, we only reached the outskirts; the security team we were traveling with in Afghanistan felt it was too dangerous to venture much further.

Even on the edge of the province I got the feeling that we were being watched very closely. No one approached us to talk, which is unusual in Afghanistan, and we received unwelcoming looks.

Is a Taliban takeover inevitable?

Dr. Wadeer Safi, head of the political science department at Kabul University, said he has mixed feelings about the planned NATO draw down in 2014.

He does not believe that NATO would disappear into "thin air." Nor did he think the country would break out into civil war or a coup d'état. Rather, he is confident NATO will leave a strong enough presence to deal with the security situation in the country and that it will be able to handle small battles with the Taliban.

However he did point out that politics is a fickle business and if the coalition did not leave a strong security presence, the Taliban could take control. He suggested that the army and police force could always just "hand themselves over" and join the Taliban.

I posed the same question to Safi about whether or not Karzai seemed more like the mayor of Kabul, rather than president.

"A mayor is better off than Karzai because he can leave the city. Karzai is a prisoner in his palace," he said with a laugh.