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Obama, the Karzai Brothers & the Ghost of Najibullah Left Margin

By Carl Bloice

BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board

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It's said that you can buy photos of Najibullah on the streets of Kabul these days and even cassettes of speeches he made in the 1980s when he was president of Afghanistan. Najibullah's name evokes controversy. Always cited are the condemnation by some Afghans for his ties to the Soviet Union and his previous role as chief of the country's internal security apparatus. However, it is impossible not to acknowledge the country social gains made during his time in leadership. As soon as his government was overthrown the victors wiped out land reform programs, instituted Sharia or Islamic religious law, cut women off from education, athletics and the professions and banned things like movies, television, videos, dancing, kite flying, and beard trimming.

Quiet as it's kept, for many in the Afghan capital, the Najibullah years were a time of great promise.

But also of great danger. Outside forces were plotting and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency was spurring reactionary groups - trained and equipped by the United States, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and others - to overthrow the Afghan government. Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter, in the words of former CIA analyst Ray McGovern, "thought it a good idea to mousetrap the Soviets into their own Vietnam debacle by baiting them into invading Afghanistan in 1979, the war which was the precursor to the great-power Afghan quagmire three decades later." In 1979, Soviet troops entered the country to defend the Afghan government and remained there nine years. The effort was pre-doomed; the USSR leadership had ignored warnings, coming from even its own military strategists, that history had shown the fiercely independent and resourceful Afghan would never be subdued by the military

might of foreign forces.

On March 10, 1992, the *New York Times* reported that with the Soviet troops having left the country, "Afghanistan's President made an impassioned appeal to the United States today to help his country become a bulwark against the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia." In an interview with correspondent Edward A. Gargan, Najibullah "also pleaded for immediate economic and humanitarian assistance from Washington," which long backed the Afghan fundamentalist guerrillas fighting his Government. He also promised that he would release four Afghans who worked in the United States Embassy and were convicted of espionage in 1983. "The Afghan President's praise for the United States and his attempt to enlist Washington in common cause against fundamentalism marked the sharpest departure yet from the open hostility that has characterized relations between Kabul and Washington since Afghanistan's leftist coup of 1978," wrote Gargan.

"We have a common task, Afghanistan, the United States of America, and the civilized world, to launch a joint struggle against fundamentalism," Najibullah told the *Times*, and "described what he thought would happen to his country if Islamic extremists took power in Kabul."

"If fundamentalism comes to Afghanistan, war will continue for many more years," Najibullah said. "Afghanistan will turn into a center of world smuggling for narcotic drugs. Afghanistan will be turned into a center for terrorism."

Well, all that has come to pass.

I was in Kabul February 15, 1989 when the final withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan took place; they had been in the country since December 1979. Most of the other reporters traveled to Jalalabad for the start of the final retreat, moving with the departing forces back to Kabul on their way out of the country. I remained in the capital and on that day a few of us were taken by our guides from the government to a shop that had been demolished by a bomb attack the previous day. It wasn't a big terrorist attack but the message was clear: this is what is in store for Kabul now.

That, too, came to pass.

Gargan attributed Najibullah's appeal to Washington to his having been "Abandoned by his former benefactors in Moscow and cast somewhat adrift in the new politics of the region." That's one way of putting it, but he really had no other choice. The USSR couldn't restrain the Taliban and the various mujahedeen factions and besides it was in the midst of a political upheaval that would about two years hence bring down the ruling Communist Party.

Najibullah had expressed support for a United Nations plan to summon – in Gargan's words "a wide spectrum of Afghans - including the Islamic fundamentalist guerrillas - to a gathering that would lead to a political accord to end Afghanistan's years of civil conflict." There is no question that he persistently pursued a campaign for national reconciliation and reached out repeatedly to tribal and religious leaders across the country and the region. On the eve of the final stage of the Soviet withdrawal, Najibullah repeated his call for compromise and national unity before a large audience of notables and foreigners. But the Mujahedeen "freedom fighters" (as they were then called by the U.S. media and politicians at the time) and their benefactors in the region and Washington weren't interested. The *Times* noted that the State Department refused to even comment on the Gargan interview.

And so the attacks continued. Najibullah and his Watan (Homeland) Party remained in office until April 1992 when a major warlord, General Abdul Rashid Dostum decided to switch sides and the government – affected by severe economic difficulties (made worse by punitive sanctions undertaken by the Russian Government of Boris Yeltsin) – fell to the combined forces of mujahedeen and various tribal groups (“warlords”). But that hardly ended the country’s travails. The victorious groups soon began to fight each other over the spoils. The greatest damage to the country’s infrastructure and the city of Kabul came not from the Soviet invasion but from the internecine rocket attacks following the government’s ouster. In 1994, the recently organized Taliban made its appearance on the scene.

Last week’s attack by the Taliban on targets in Kabul carried with them a grave symbolism. After Najibullah’s overthrow his family was able to flee the country but he refused to leave, choosing instead to take refuge in the United Nations compound where he remained for four years. In September 1996 the Taliban took control of Kabul from the Mujahedeen and began to bombard the UN facility. Najibullah was taken from the compound along with his brother, his secretary and his bodyguards. They were all hanged. The bloody body of the deposed president was hung from a lamp post, his severed private parts stuck in his mouth.

One Afghan writer suggested Najibullah deserved his fate having been naïve enough to think the Taliban would recognize the UN center as out of bounds. Last week’s attack lay to rest that notion once again.

And so it came to pass that from that time forward to the Al Qaeda attack on the United States September 11, 2001 and beyond, Afghanistan has been and continues to be “a center of world smuggling for narcotic drugs” and “a center for terrorism.”

Over the years, the Left in that part of the world (and a lot of other places) has made a many mistakes that contributed to the advance of rightwing reactionary movements and forces. However, the biggest culprits have been the U.S. and its Western allies. In their zeal to crush communist, socialist and left movements and parties and a desire to control petroleum resources, they have anointed and fostered the fundamentalists over the secular and democratic, and taken advantage of religious, ethnic and sectarian divisions, stirring pots where they could find them from Central Europe to Iraq.

Oh, and that narcotics thing. What short memories we sometime have. Yes, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency sometime cavorts with drug dealers. It did it in the war in South East Asia a few decades ago. Remember the Golden Triangle? “If it sounds a lot like Vietnam when Vietnam started to really come apart, it is — President Diem’s grotesquely corrupt brother was a CIA source and a noxious agent of influence,” writes Robert Baer, a former Middle East CIA field office, in *Time* magazine.

“We came into Afghanistan in October 2001 with the same willful blindness. The CIA knew that its ally, the Tajik Northern Alliance, was a paid-up proxy of Iran, just as it was fully aware that another ally, Uzbek General Dostum, was one of Afghanistan’s great butchers (though Dostum has always denied the widespread allegations of his brutality). When it came to finding crucial partners on the ground, there were simply no alternatives.”

According to *Time*, “From December 2001 through 2002, according to a former Drug Enforcement Administration official speaking on condition of anonymity, ‘the CIA and the military turned a blind eye to drug traffickers if they thought they could help them against Taliban and al-Qaeda.’”

"We had no problem dealing with Afghan Islamic fundamentalists, terrorists, drug dealers and thugs when the Carter and Reagan White Houses waged a proxy war against the Soviet Union in the '80s," writes Baer. "The CIA and the White House turned a blind eye to our proxies' faults because the fundamentalists were the best fighters and happy to take down our Cold War enemy.

"The claim that Ahmed Wali Karzai has been on the payroll of the CIA for the past eight years, as reported in today's *New York Times*, won't come as a surprise to most Afghans, who have long considered his brother, Afghan president Hamid Karzai, to be an American puppet," wrote Aryn Baker in *Time* on October 28. "The revamped allegations that Karzai *frère* is deeply involved in Afghanistan's annual \$4-billion drug industry isn't much of a shocker either - on the streets of Kabul and Kandahar the name 'Wali' has long been synonymous with someone who can get away with a crime because he has friends in the right places. Diplomats, counter-narcotics officials and commanders from the International Security Assistance Force, NATO's military wing in Afghanistan, have all privately (and not so privately) expressed frustration with President Karzai for not reining in his brother. In fact, the people most likely to be shocked by the revelations are Americans back at home, who are already wondering why we should be sending more soldiers and money to a country whose leadership has rarely proved an adequate partner."

As it turns out there are more than two Karzai brothers. Citing recent study published by the Center on International Cooperation at New York University, investigative reporter Gareth Porter Writes:

"The report suggests that the U.S. and NATO contingents are spending hundreds of millions of dollars annually on contracts with Afghan security providers, most of which are local power brokers guilty of human rights abuses."

"In addition to Ahmed Wali Karzai, it names Hashmat Karzai, another brother of President Karzai, and Hamid Wardak, the son of Defence Minister Rahim Wardak, as powerful figures who control private security firms that have gotten security contracts without registering with the government."

The allegation of drug dealing and CIA payoff to Ahmed Wali Karzai" throws into sharp relief the most crucial question the administration now faces in Afghanistan," wrote Mark Sappenfield in the *Christian Science Monitor* last Wednesday. "Should America continue its policy of working with warlords and disreputable power-brokers in an attempt to use their influence to advance US interests? Or should it instead focus on protecting the Afghan people - in many cases from the very warlords the US has supported in the past?"

I was sitting around the other day with a group of people whose views, one might say, ranged from center to left. On Afghanistan they appeared to be of the unanimous opinion that U.S. policy had to make a sharp departure from the past. The best option for the Obama Administration is neither "counterinsurgency" nor "counterterrorism." Nor is total disengagement desired, they agreed. The answer lies in development. A "Marshall Plan" sized program to tackle poverty and illiteracy in the region could improve the situation. Military escalation will only make matters worse.

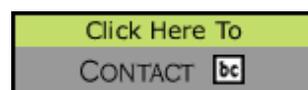
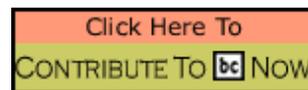
Of course, launching such an effort would require an end to the fighting and the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops.. A path to that would likely lay in a proposal widely broached in Europe and hardly mentioned in this country for an international conference involving; first and foremost, all Afghanistan's neighboring states and each

of the warring parties in the country with the aim of arriving at a security agreement. It might come through the United Nations like the plan that Najibullah was entertaining back in 1998 – long before September 11. Only this way can the conditions arise for the Afghan people to decide their own destiny free of dictates and intrigues from abroad. In any case, the proper path for the U.S. must not involve continuing to bed down with the feudal warlords and the likes of the Karzai brothers. That puts us on the wrong side of history and decency.

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