

Neither a peace process nor an endgame in Afghanistan

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ISLAMABAD: “There is neither a peace process nor an endgame in Afghanistan,” said senior journalist, Rahimullah Yousafzai, while addressing a roundtable organized by the Institute of Regional Studies on the subject, “Afghanistan: An Elusive Peace Process” here on Wednesday. He argued that all the peace talks were heavy on cosmetics and light in substance. While dispelling the notions about an endgame in Afghanistan, he said that all the signs were pointing toward a long-term U.S. presence there no matter how limited in numbers. This, he believed, would mean a continuing war and instability in Afghanistan and, by extension, in Pakistan as well.

He added that the long-term U.S. presence would soon be institutionalized with a strategic partnership agreement between Afghanistan and the U.S. after endorsement by the Afghan *Loya Jirga* spelling the unstable future for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Yousafzai also viewed the strategic agreement between Afghanistan and India as an impediment towards peace in Afghanistan, because he believed that the agreement had killed any incentive that Pakistan would have had in continuing to support the peace process.

Mr. Yousafzai shared that the Taliban were having an office in Doha, Qatar, with Tayyab Agha in-charge of it. He disclosed that the Taliban were negotiating with the NATO troops through Tayyab Agha and some other members of the Taliban movement in Germany as he spoke. He said that for Taliban, negotiating away from Pakistan was an expression of independence from Pakistan, which was a concern for Pakistan. Besides this act of defiance against Islamabad, Yousafzai did not see much substance in the negotiation process though. He called it an act of sizing up the opponent by both the parties and not any serious effort at bringing an end to the conflict in Afghanistan. He was of the opinion that the way the NATO wanted to negotiate from a position of strength, the Taliban wanted to do the same and would never agree to a settlement as long as NATO ambitions would remain unclear to them. Yousafzai also made the interesting disclosure that some of the Taliban commanders negotiating with NATO in Germany were on the UN Blacklist and could not technically travel internationally.

Rahimullah Yousafzai termed the story of Afghanistan as characterized by conflict, corruption, and narcotics. He was of the view that all the elections in Afghanistan were rigged and that warlords were ruling the roost in the country. He added that Karzai had also lost support and credibility after his second re-election. Many former members of the Karzai cabinet were now in opposition, according to Yousafzai, opposing any peace overtures towards the Taliban. He added that the representation of Pashtuns in the national parliament in the current term had reduced to 88 out of the total of 249 from 113 in the previous term. This, he asserted, was partly because of the intimidation by the Taliban in the Pashtun-majority areas.

Taliban, Rahimullah Yousafzai maintained, had fought the battle in Afghanistan with heavy casualties, but they were able to reinforce their ranks through fresh recruitment despite being outnumbered 15 to 1 by their opponents according to western estimates of their numbers. He pointed out that the Taliban

Report: Roundtable on “Afghanistan: An Elusive Peace Process” with Rahimullah Yousafzai, Bureau Chief Peshawar of The News, held on November 2, 2011

did not have the capacity to shoot down aircraft or helicopters except a couple of isolated incidents, and added that if they could acquire the capacity, it could be an overnight game-changer, the way stingers were in the mid-1980s. “If that happens, Americans won’t be able to stay even for another year in Afghanistan,” said Yousafzai.

Rahimullah Yousafzai maintained that the Haqqani Network (HQN) was operating more or less independently from what the westerners call the Quetta Shura Taliban (QST), but that it would never betray Mullah Omar, because Sirajuddin Haqqani was a member of the Rahbari Shura of the Taliban called the QST. He further argued that the HQN was also independent of Pakistani control. He said that in his private conversations with Siraj Haqqani and other members of the HQN, they had claimed that Pakistan needed the HQN more than the HQN needed Pakistan and that they could easily operate independently and even against the wishes of Pakistan.

Yousafzai shared that India was keenly investing in the future of Afghanistan with a carefully spent \$ 2 billion on development assistance for the country that ranged from donating Airbus to Ariana Airlines to power generation and acquisition projects to providing free lunches to schoolchildren. India, Yousafzai argued, had learnt its lesson from being unable to penetrate Afghanistan throughout the 1990s. He urged the Pakistani decision-makers to learn from the course-correction of the Indians and try to build lasting relations with all parties in Afghanistan rather than ones based on short-term interests and mutual suspicion.