

“Tough on Terror”: Bleeding Afghanistan

Interview with Sonali Kolhatkar

By [Mike Whitney](#)

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In-depth Report: [AFGHANISTAN](#)

1-Mike Whitney: On a recent stopover in France, Barack Obama said, “We must win in Afghanistan. There is no other option.” Recent polls, however, show that public support for the war in Afghanistan has fallen off sharply. In fact, many American’s don’t even know why we are still there. Is there a big difference between what “winning” means to the Bush administration and what it means to the people of Afghanistan? Also, have you seen any indication that the Bush administration intends to keep its promises and establish security, rebuild the country’s infrastructure, spread democracy, remove the warlords, liberate women, and “modernize” Afghanistan or was that all just a public relations smokescreen to promote the invasion?

Sonali Kolhatkar: I’m really not sure what Bush, Obama, and McCain mean when they say they want to win in Afghanistan. And, I’m not sure they know either. It’s probably just a public-relations gimmick to sound “tough on terror.” But, judging from what we’ve seen, they seem to think that “winning” means killing every last “terrorist” in Afghanistan. That sort of thinking is based on false assumptions and it’s an unattainable goal. As far as the Afghans are concerned; I think they would like to see an end to the fighting and a safe Afghanistan where human rights are respected. They also want justice for past crimes. For the US to achieve this, they will have to denounce their proxy soldiers, the Northern Alliance, and support a “justice and accountability” process led by the Afghan people.

The US will also have to address the widespread poverty and provide long-term economic solutions that give Afghans hope for the future. The US will also have to create viable alternatives to the production of heroin, so that poor farmers don’t have to depend on the sale of illicit narcotics to survive. That means Bush will have to support multi-lateral peacekeepers to protect the Afghan people from the Northern Alliance and Taliban. Most importantly, the US will have to end the occupation and withdraw its troops. But of course, that probably won’t happen any time soon. After all, the real goal of the invasion was vengeance for 9/11. All the promises of liberation and democracy were a just “PR-ploy” to make Americans feel better about seeking revenge.

2-MW: Critics of the invasion say that it had nothing to do with Al Qaida or “liberating” the Afghan people from the Taliban, but with establishing military outposts in a geopolitically strategic part of Central Asia in order to surround China, intimidate Russia, and open up pipeline corridors to the resource-rich Caspian Basin. So, what is Obama up to? Why is he calling for more troops and greater commitment from the other NATO members? Is he serious about spreading democracy and fighting Islamic extremism or is the war on terror just a smokescreen so he can carry out an imperial agenda?

Sonali Kolhatkar: I think the primary goal of the war was always vengeance, but the neocons also wanted to pave the way for an attack on Iraq. Bush wanted to go to Iraq even before 9/11. Unfortunately for him, Al Qaeda was holed up in Afghanistan so he had to invade there first and build support for attacking Iraq. It's true that the long term goals could be military bases (John McCain said last year that he wanted permanent military bases in Afghanistan), and pipeline corridors (Clinton was most closely linked to supporting pipeline contracts between US corporations like UNOCAL and the Taliban before 2000). But I'm not sure how much Bush cared about those long-term objectives even though future presidents will surely capitalize on them.

As far as Obama's motives, I think he just wants to get elected. But he knows that he cannot be against all wars, only an unpopular one. He knows that a candidate that is against all wars will not win in November.

He's talked about withdrawing from Iraq, but that's because it's a popular position with the public. But he's also planning to increase troop levels in Afghanistan because he is not being pressured by the American people. Americans may be unclear about why our troops are there, but they are not organized or speaking out against the Afghanistan war. Obama needs a war like Afghanistan, because it was a haven for Al Qaeda and that makes him look "tough on terror." That will help him win more votes from anti-Iraq war conservatives and independents.

3-MW: The United States has occupied Afghanistan for seven years now. Has life gotten better for the people or worse? Is there any security beyond the capital of Kabul or are the US and NATO troops stretched too thin? Do the people generally support the ongoing occupation or are they getting frustrated by the lack of progress and want to see the US go?

Sonali Kolhatkar: Initially, life got better for many Afghans, particularly in Kabul. That's because the Taliban had been routed and the people felt somewhat safe as well as relieved. But as the warlords took over positions of power, attitudes changed. It has gotten much worse, now that the Taliban have returned and the occupation forces are killing more civilians than the Taliban.

Kabul is a bit more secure than the rest of the country. But Kabul is also the warlords' seat of power. Most of them are even members of Parliament, so people are frequently abused and live in fear.

Beyond Kabul, things vary dramatically depending on where you go. In the parts of the country with the heaviest concentrations of US/NATO troops; Afghans are frequently rounded-up, detained, tortured, bombed, or shot by foreign troops just as in Iraq.

In other parts of the country, where the Taliban are strong; girls schools are blown up, civilians are killed in suicide bombings, and journalists, teachers, and elected officials are harassed or murdered.

Those areas controlled by warlords are ruled with an iron hand, where extreme interpretations of sharia law rule the day, and women suffer rape and degradation.

No matter where you go in Afghanistan, there is utter, grinding poverty. The US occupation has not changed that at all. People are very frustrated, particularly with the US puppet Hamid Karzai. They blame Karzai for the high number of civilian casualties. They also dislike

the way he has pardoned some of the warlords and Taliban leaders.

As far as the occupation goes, people were somewhat supportive of it originally, but as conditions have deteriorated, they have begun to see the presence of foreign troops as a big part of the problem. I would say that a majority of Afghans now want the US and NATO to leave as soon as possible.

4-MW: Is the US military mainly fighting the Taliban or is the the armed-resistance more complex than that? I read recently that the so-called Taliban is actually a confederation of about a dozen disparate groups and tribes that have bonded together with the common goal of ending foreign occupation and that the main reason their ranks are swelling is because of the US military's indiscriminate killing of civilians? Could you clarify this point?

Sonali Kolhatkar: It's hard to understand the nature of the anti-US resistance, but it's a very important issue. Unfortunately, the media coverage only makes it more confusing. The fighters that are called the "Taliban" are actually a mix of "former" Taliban and newly enlisted Pashtun fighters trained in Pakistan. Many of them are just disgruntled Afghan civilians whose families and loved ones have been killed and/or tortured by US/NATO forces. Recruiting is always easy when you can show that foreign soldiers are killing more civilians than the "so-called" enemy. But we should be careful to not glorify the resistance. It is strictly fundamentalist and would not be a good option for Afghans in terms of future leadership. The vast majority of Afghans are moderate Muslims who strongly disagree with the Taliban's extremist ideology, but they have joined the struggle to bring an end to the occupation. But, of course, their troubles won't disappear just because the American forces leave. They'll still be stuck with the Taliban and the warlords. When the Soviet occupation ended in the late 1980s, the US-backed warlords began their reign of terror on the people between 1992 to 1996. That could happen again. These same warlords (or Taliban) could once again spread misery and death across Afghanistan. War is an entropic force that cannot be undone by simply hitting a rewind button.

5-MW: What will happen if the US military leaves Afghanistan? Is withdrawal the best solution or do you see another, perhaps, less bloody, alternative?

Sonali Kolhatkar: There are always less bloody alternatives, but withdrawal is the first step in a long and complex process. As I've said before, Afghanistan's solutions do not fit neatly on a placard. Perhaps that's why anti-war activists don't take a clear stand against this war. The withdrawal of US/NATO forces must be accompanied by other developments, like disempowering the warlords in parliament who have a long history of US-supported impunity. This disempowering must include an "Afghan-led" disarmament of their private militias; removing them from political power, and holding them accountable for their past crimes through criminal prosecution of some sort.

There must also be a "transitional" UN peacekeeping force that maintains security and protects ordinary people from the fundamentalists (Taliban and Northern Alliance) But they must make sure that they don't target civilians.

There must also be economic justice in the form of reparations (matching the money that has been spent on weapons since 1979, dollar-for-dollar) and a plan to build up local industries, create jobs, and provide alternatives to poppy farming.

There must be political justice so that dissidents can come out of the shadows and run for

office or participate in the rebuilding their national institutions. When the Afghan people decide that it's time for the peacekeepers to leave; they should go.

Can such a solution work?

Perhaps. But for this, or any other idea to work, the US occupation must end. That's the first big step to recovery.

6-MW: There is a very brave and outspoken woman in the Afghan parliament, named Malalai Joya. She has repeatedly put her own life at risk by denouncing the warlords and calling for an end to the US occupation. She has consistently called out for human rights and real democracy. Has the Bush administration done anything at all to promote or protect courageous women who embody "liberal values" like Malalai Joya?

Sonali Kolhatkar: Women like Malalai Joya are "inconvenient" for the Bush administration. That's because Joya echoes the will of her people in calling for an end to warlords, AND an end to the US occupation. Bush and his cohorts like to promote the type of women who quietly accept the US narrative and show gratitude for being "saved by the Americans." In fact, there are very few such women like that in Afghanistan. Joya speaks for millions of Afghan women when she denounces the warlords. And she has repeatedly put herself in danger. She has nearly been killed at least four times! What this means is that women's rights are available only to women who do not exercise their rights. And it not just Malalai Joya who is putting herself at risk due to her political activism. I have personally worked very closely with the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), and they have been saying the same things for years. Still, RAWA cannot operate openly without putting themselves in danger of physical harm; so they must carry out their work underground.

RAWA has NEVER received any offer of help from the US government (although they would refuse it if it anyway to remain politically independent) Like Joya, the women of RAWA are inconvenient - they do not need to be "saved" by America. But they do need a safe Afghanistan and they deserve international solidarity for their brave human rights work.

7-MW: The invasion of Afghanistan was promoted as a humanitarian intervention to save the Afghans from the brutal Taliban regime. How would you advise people who now think we should take similar action in Darfur to stop the killing there? Is military invasion an acceptable way to address injustice or spread democracy?

Sonali Kolhatkar: I'm not sure I have a definitive answer to that question, but I do think it is one that progressives need to grapple with. Too often, we in the West are very selective when it comes to the causes we support. Only when the US is directly involved do activists choose to oppose a regime. Before the US war in Afghanistan, when the country was being destroyed by the warlords and then the Taliban, it was not seen as a cause worth taking on by American activists. But if the people are being oppressed by someone else, we ignore it. The sad truth is that until progressives come up strategies for dealing with repressive regimes, we'll always just be reacting to unjust interventions by our government.

Military options are always the worst. Even so, diplomacy can be nearly as corrupt if it means compromising with criminals and warlords and giving them whatever they want in exchange for peace. Peace without justice is meaningless. We could have peace now in

Afghanistan if we were willing to give the warlords and Taliban ultimate power. In fact, there was a kind of “peace” under the Taliban. But is that what we want?

If we want real justice we need to figure out a reasonable way to deal with injustice. We need to create alternatives that involve people-to-people solidarity and democracy that can transform society. For example, one way we could have dealt with the Taliban without invading would have been for individual Americans (not our government) to financially and morally support the subversive (and non-violent) work of groups like RAWA. That way, Afghans would have been able to change their country by themselves without foreign intervention and massive destruction. Indeed, RAWA supports change from within and have called on their people to rise up. But their effectiveness has been limited by a lack of resources to help them get the word out while organizing underground. Solidarity with groups like RAWA (and there may be similar ones in Darfur) is one long-term, progressive alternative to foreign intervention.

Sonali Kolhatkar is the host and producer of Uprising, a popular radio program through Pacifica Network, that airs on stations around the country. She is also the Co-Director of Afghan Women’s Mission, a US-based non-profit organization that works in solidarity with the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA). She is the co-author, with James Ingalls, of Bleeding Afghanistan: Washington, Warlords, and the Propaganda of Silence (Seven Stories 2006). More information at www.afghanwomensmission.org , www.rawa.org .

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