

AFGHANISTAN AND VIETNAM: ON PRESIDENTS AND PITFALLS

by H. J. de Blij

Hamid Karzai's victory in Afghanistan's disputed presidential election has created a diplomatic and strategic dilemma that is producing some troubling commentary by American officials and much strident criticism in the media. The Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, John Kerry, in an interview from Kabul on *Face the Nation* on October 19, stated that the U.S. is facing strategic decisions "without an adequate government in place." Vice President Joe Biden has been unsparing in his disparagement of Karzai, whose government and family are linked to corruption and drug dealing. In an October 14 column in the *New York Times*, Thomas Friedman laments the "tainted government" of Afghanistan and the "massive fraud" engaged in by President Karzai to secure his re-election, arguing for a runoff to secure a more "acceptable" government to replace the one now in power, so as "to stabilize Afghanistan without tipping America into a Vietnam."

Comparisons between Afghanistan and Vietnam are frequently drawn these days, but the two contingencies are starkly different. Yet what happened in Vietnam in 1963 suggests caution in Afghanistan today. At that time, South Vietnam was in turmoil as the Viet Cong were gaining in remote northern rural areas; 12,000 American "advisors" were supposedly training South Vietnamese forces to shore up the South's defenses. South Vietnam's President Ngo Dinh Diem, facing growing Buddhist resistance marked gruesomely by public self-immolations by numerous monks, was unpopular with American policymakers. His autocratic methods, reputation for corruption, and harsh response to his religious opponents elicited severe criticism from American leaders and pundits. When President Diem asked the United States government to reduce the number of American advisors in his country, he lost what little support he retained in Washington – and found his political base weakened at home.

On November 1, 1963 a military coup carried out by soldiers, some of whom had benefited from the presence of American advisors, overthrew President Diem, who was summarily executed. In official and media commentary in the United States afterward, Diem got little obituary solace. In South Vietnam, a so-called revolutionary council took power and inaugurated a fateful period of more compliant association with American policymakers.

American insistence on an electoral runoff in Afghanistan and Washington's apparent belief that President Karzai's opponent, if victorious, would form a less corrupt government may be misplaced. The rules of political, social, and economic engagement in Afghanistan that have prevailed for centuries will not be changed by an electoral runoff that may not only fail to alter the outcome but could risk chaos arising from the rekindling of hopes dashed and buried by Karzai's victory. Afghanistan remains a deeply-divided country in which warlords, tribal chiefs, insurgents, brazen criminals, and a small cadre of courageous Kabul-based progressives are just some of the parties looking for their piece of the action; not for nothing do international monitors rank this as one of the world's most corrupt societies. Karzai, with his merits as well as faults, has come to symbolize and stabilize the state; foreigners forcing a runoff may leave him either victorious but severely weakened or defeated with no guarantee of a

superior successor. Add to this the alternate prospect of an adversarial “power-sharing” government and an ongoing political crisis, and it appears that one lesson of Vietnam, at least, is going unheeded.