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It's the Corruption, Stupid

Rep. Jane Harman

In recent weeks, prominent American politicians and columnists have begun debating troop levels in Afghanistan. Some call for a complete withdrawal, while others favor increasing the number of U.S. troops.

The size of U.S. forces in Afghanistan is a critical issue, but a debate about troop strength misses the point. Unless and until one other problem is addressed, neither more troops nor fewer troops will reverse the tide of terrorism being fomented in Afghanistan or improve our national security.

It's the corruption, stupid.

Eliminating corruption in Afghanistan is in both that nation's interest and ours. From the Afghan perspective, an honest government would give the people a genuine say in the direction of their country. For us, it would dramatically increase our national security, both because it would increase the effectiveness of our efforts to fight the Taliban and because the end result would be an Afghan population more invested in taking on the fight themselves. That is our real objective.

When I traveled to Afghanistan in April with Sen. Jon Kyl, Arizona Republican, we were warned by opposition candidates that the country's presidential election would be marred by widespread fraud. They were right. On top of everything else that we have learned about the Afghan government, the vote that took place on Aug. 20 was a sham. Every indication is that the election results have been completely skewed by widespread, systematic fraud.

Afghan politics have never been particularly clean -- money, power and position traditionally have been traded for support from tribal and ethnic blocs. But evidence of fraud in last month's election is colossally disturbing: Voter cards were bought and sold freely in the run-up to the vote, precinct workers arrived at dawn to find ballot boxes stuffed full, some districts recorded more votes than there were registered voters, and nationwide voter registration surpassed the number of eligible voters by as much as 5 million. The Electoral Complaints

Commission, appointed by President Hamid Karzai, has received more than 2,000 reports of violations, hundreds of which would have the potential to alter the election's outcome if proved true.

But electoral fraud is merely a symptom of a much graver problem plaguing the country -- the failure to establish good governance. Pervasive corruption infects all levels of the Afghan government. Tribal elders in Kandahar told us they were so fed up with the Karzai government that they would join the Taliban if better governance could not be achieved.

This election is a chilling reminder of what's at stake. Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal appears to understand this. His emphasis on joint civilian-military efforts to improve governance is much needed, but the American people deserve some accountability. Congress should not even be asked about more troops without first being shown evidence that some anti-corruption metrics have been achieved, not just announced.

The U.S. military's mission will be undermined so long as the Afghan government fails to govern. That's what's happening right now.

A recent poll found 83 percent of Afghans think their country needs to change direction. Lowering that disapproval number should be a key ingredient in any measure of governance; public opinion is essential in judging whether the government has earned the people's trust. That's what a successful counterinsurgency effort is really about: giving Afghans faith in their institutions and developing a willingness to cooperate with and protect them. Public opinion should be gauged on a province-by-province basis to help assess where government is succeeding and where it is not.

But change must start at the top. If the sham election stands and Mr. Karzai remains president, he must drastically change his personal politics. He has preserved his position of power through a series of politically expedient but morally repugnant alliances. This includes turning a blind eye to Helmand province, where his brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, has become a legendary and detested figure. The Karzais deny Ahmed Wali's involvement in the heroin trade -- Helmand is the world's primary producer -- but don't quarrel that he is in the "transportation business."

Hamid Karzai also cut a deal that reimposed Shariah law on Afghanistan's Shi'ite population, which returned women to their traditional role as property, with girls sold as brides and women legally required to "submit" to their husbands' sexual needs.

In his bid to win re-election, Mr. Karzai welcomed back from exile the warlord -- and accused war criminal -- Abdul Rashid Dostum and chose as a running mate Mohammad Qasim Fahim, one of Afghanistan's major narco-traffickers.

Mr. Karzai cannot be allowed to run his government as a "family business." Distancing himself from these relationships no doubt will cost him politically, but failure to implement reforms will produce a far worse outcome.

Success in Afghanistan is essential; the United States has invested too many troops and too much treasure to fail. But raising troop levels is the wrong place to start the discussion of how to move forward. Better governance is the right place. That way the additional troops will be Afghans. It is their fight, and they should constitute the overwhelming majority of the forces fighting to protect their country.

Rep. Jane Harman, California Democrat, chairs the House Homeland Security subcommittee on intelligence and terrorism risk assessment.

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