

Huntington Woods Peace, Citizenship and Education Project

Who's Afraid of the Afghan War? -- Wed., May 20, 2009

Speaker Prasad Venugopal of University of Detroit-Mercy gave a primer on the American war in Afghanistan and actions in Pakistan.

Event summary- Mike Duffy

On Wednesday May 20 we held our monthly meeting in the Huntington Woods Library. Recently we have been trying to learn more about Afghanistan in order to comment more knowledgeably about the war and to see if we can formulate a realistic policy which could make the lives of ordinary Afghans better and lead to more peaceful and less tense region.

For this meeting we invited Prasad Venugopal, a Professor of Physics at UD Mercy to talk about Afghanistan. Dr. Venugopal has thought a great deal about south Asia and knows a great deal about the ethnic dynamics and history of the region. Furthermore, he is a member of the US Peace Council, Detroit Area Peace With Justice Network (DAPJN), a member of the United for Peace and Justice Committee, and MCHR.

Before getting into the subject matter of the talk, I would like to review the history of 20th century Afghanistan very quickly. The British had lost two wars in Afghanistan in the 19th century, but they had managed to make themselves the de facto makers of Afghan foreign policy, presumably modeled on a similar arrangement in Egypt. The Afghans and the Afghan monarchy used WWI as an opportune time to expel the British and introduce substantial liberalization, especially in education. The monarchy eventually backpedaled somewhat. In the meantime the impetus for modernization and the reaction to it both grew stronger. In 1964 a republic was declared by the monarchy which seemed to satisfy nobody. I wonder whether this was an attempt to win the hearts and minds of the people. Regardless, polarization continued to increase. In 1973 there was a coup de etat which overthrew the monarchy. Faced with a revolt by the warlords and their warriors (the Mujihideen), and pressure from the left, the government planned to assassinate the leftists, but the leftists did unto the government before the government could do unto them. In 1978 the government was overthrown and a forthrightly liberal government was created. When this happened, the US promoted destabilization and the Soviet Union invaded in 1979 to preserve the pro-Soviet government. At least nominally the Afghan government requested the troops from the Soviet Union. In 1989 the Soviet Union was forced to leave the country because the cost in lives and money was far too large to sustain, particularly in light of the massive military aid given to the Mujihideen by the US and Pakistan. At the end of the war the Mujihideen began to fight among themselves, largely along ethnic lines, Turkic and Iranian vs. Pashtun. Eventually the largely Pashtun Taliban settled the civil war by conquering both shortly before 9/11/ 2001.

Prasad's talk was even briefer regarding the recent history of Afghanistan, but that was because what seemed to matter most to him was that he considered war in Afghanistan impossible to consider in isolation. For instance, he told us that the Taliban in the tribal areas of Pakistan are destabilizing Pakistan, and the Taliban fighters in Kashmir (Jammu) are worsening conflict with India. In both cases the Pakistani military has reacted largely in defense of the Taliban, and in Kashmir a major confrontation with India was narrowly averted. Meanwhile, the government of Pakistan has been shown to be largely unable to determine the affairs of Pakistan and the United States is alienating both Afghans and Pakistanis.

Prasad also said that in Pakistan the ISI, the Pakistani equivalent of the CIA, is still funding the Taliban at the same time the Pakistani Army is under pressure to defend the Taliban and to fight them actively. With the exception of a few high profile engagements the Army has defended the Taliban. He sees these contradictions leading to a military government in Pakistan.

We had little time for questions, but there were two clear ones. First was whether we should really consider Afghanistan a nation. Prasad said we should. Second was to recommend action for us to take. He recommended four actions the US government should take:

- Have only civilian aid only i.e. no military aid
- Publicly state that there is no military solution
- Support the Kelly/Lugar amendment. I assume he means the Kerry/Lugar amendment to support public health programs and debt relief
- Do not tie economic aid to anything else

Present American policy seems to be veering toward counterinsurgency instead, with assassination squads being a key component. It is my opinion that the impending moral and humanitarian disaster could be as bad as in Iraq as well as having the potential to support regional war as Prasad warned.