

What Makes President Karzai Tick?
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One of the most difficult issues for foreign policy is to understand the default nature of a culture. By this, I mean, what are the normal values that people in a particular culture have, values inculcated by parents, community, and history? Human beings are certainly capable of sometimes radical change under the right circumstances\227but over the long haul, we all revert to what feels natural and right.

Americans are always taken aback when a person from another culture\227a traditional culture--goes to school in the United States or Europe yet reverts to the least enlightened aspects of their native culture. Former South African President Mbeke, despite a European doctorate, proclaimed that AIDS was not caused by a virus, but by poverty. This really stupid notion cost the lives of countless South Africans who might be alive today had they received medicines.

Unfortunately, Mbeke has been followed by another president, Jacob Zuma, who, despite exposure to such western values as Communism, has reverted to a very tribal practice of polygamy, augmented by concubinage, a genuine embarrassment to educated South Africans.

Friends of mine who spent some years at the highest levels of Malaysian society were always shocked when they noted how quickly their professionally educated friends reverted to the most primitive aspects of their traditional culture. All the critical thinking they learned abroad was dumped in favor of conspiracy theories\227notions that appeal to their population but would offend any real thinker.

We assume that when a person from another culture speaks English well, they must think the way we do too. This gets us into trouble in international diplomacy. We need to look to our own default culture\227the values that we assume most of the time without thought.

The American default position is usually egalitarian; we do not have a rigid class system\227with the sole exception of our ongoing struggle with race. We tend to treat our neighbors and even strangers with courtesy, not out of fear, but out of good will. We have the luxury of being generous, optimistic, and open because we have never been occupied by an enemy nor have we ever faced real hunger. But this is not so for people from the developing world, such as Afghanistan. President Karzai shocks us when he reverts to the default culture from which he comes.

His culture is largely tribal, and Mr. Karzai behaves as a tribal khan. His clothing is deliberately designed to make him appear regal, as befits a tribal leader. And, despite his secular graduate school education in India, he is oblivious to issues such as nepotism (appointing his greedy brothers), corruption, and abuse of women. He has played the game (again, part of his culture) in a way that impressed the US and UN, who apparently assumed that he was the perfect person to lead a new democracy. And perhaps that was his original intent\227but over these years, he has simply reverted to the culture he knows, a culture forged in pain and danger.

He is described by analysts as imperious, theatrical, paranoid (yes, he has enemies), and irritated by pressure from the West. He protests bitterly when a missile attack on terrorists takes out civilians\227as he should\227except there is plenty of doubt that these were civilians\227and makes no fuss at all when Taliban deliberately murders women and children. As a traditional Khan, he is accustomed to playing rough and negotiating only when necessary. He threatens that he will go join the Taliban, which upsets our State Department\227yet we should all hope that he does and makes room for someone better.

We cannot expect leaders reared in a culture very different from ours to behave in what we consider enlightened self-interest. But sometimes a few people rise above the cultures in which they are brought up. If so, it is luck, but we should know that such behavior infuriates their traditional and corrupt colleagues. They will not hesitate to kill such a leader. Karzai is all we have right now.

675 words

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