Some hope is still alive in beleaguered Kandahar

The general commentary on Afghanistan sketches a somewhat depressing, even hopeless portrayal of a war that is said to have reached a strategic stalemate. To a large extent, these prescriptions are merited. That the war is not going well is accepted by all. Increasing domestic pressures have led the Dutch to cut and run, with the Canadians soon to follow.

Indeed, the loss of strategic momentum can be traced to the salons of "Washington and London. In their respective election campaigns, both President Barack Obama and Prime Minister David Cameron used forceful rhetoric to define Afghanistan as a "key battleground". Once elected, the heresies of the two campaign candidates was almost immediately lost to the so-called real politics considerations of elected leadership. As one British official closely associated with Cameron's inner coterie states, "The question of withdrawal is not when, but how fast. Contrary to what might be called the God's eye view, the worm's eye perspective is somewhat more optimistic. For development gurus, western military personnel, and various Afghan agencies working on the ground, there is much to be proud of. Sanjiv Bhasin, in a cause few politicians can grasp, is based on fact rather than spin. The dying passion in Whitehall or Capitol Hill is converted into infatuation for those individuals involved in the everyday business of change.

The story of Kandahar provides a sneak preview to another side of this conflict, where hope is yet to be lost. The current campaign for Kandahar City (KC) and the neighbouring environs of Arghandab, Zhariay, and Pashtwa, all located in southern Afghanistan, has been labelled Hamaki — the Dari word for togetherness. The idea is for the Afghan National Technical (ANP), Afghan National Army (ANA), and the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to work collectively to bolster governance in the Taliban's former spiritual, if not physical heartland.

Kandahar is by far the most complicated and politically charged environment to conduct a campaign for what is commonly referred to as "state-isation": allowing the Afghan Government rather than parallel actors to influence outcomes. The insurgency is more local in nature, where, to some extent, the lack of infrastructure and opportunity shapes behaviour. Mullah Omar and the Talibans as "we" know it, operating out of the backlands of Pakistan, are concepts for most local Kandaharis. Criminal gangs and power brokers matter more than the ominous "Taliban". Indeed, the fact that President Hamid Karzai's half-brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, lives in KC complicates the political dynamics associated with Hamaki.

This notwithstanding, in the past 12 months, much has changed in Kandahar. Tooyailisi Wesa, the erstwhile weak and ineffective provincial governor appears to have been empowered. With greater degrees of support from Kabul, Wesa is seen holding local Shura meetings — and engaging local elders. His job is to cement the idea of governance in the minds and streets of Kandahar. This is no mean feat. Propaganda needs to be supported by deeds. Luckily for Wesa, the deed exists in the form of visible administrative structures and infrastructural development. Ever since ISAF made KC a priority, the city has been divided into ten sub-districts. Each sub-district consists of municipal administrators, a police chief. Essentially, now there exists a platform for Kandaharis to complain about water, electricity... that people complain needs to be understood as progress.

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As far as electricity is concerned, the key deliverables have centred on diesel generators to supply power in the immediate term. Compared to only a few years ago, the provision of electricity has hit both streets and markets. While a lot more needs to be done to increase generator capacity from the existing 20-30 MWs to 150-175 MWs, the fact that electricity has come to KC is remarked by all. Whether this goodwill can be sustained, depends as much upon local actors as those of the wishes and fancies of Western electorates.

As in other parts of Afghanistan, the greatest irony of the efforts in KC are that just as the governance piece is beginning to gain momentum, the strategic concerns of American and European political heads have shifted focus. Steered by ever sceptical journalists and broadcasters, what these leaders fail to see is that progress — or relative progress — has already come to Afghanistan. The key is to overcome into political speak for success, allowing the agents of change to continue their mission minus the strategic following the much talked about mid-term elections in the US or the less noticed political tensions within the Taliban. Dr Rudra Chaudhuri, Lecturer, King's College London, was recently in Afghanistan.