



Post-Election Security Challenges in Afghanistan

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The recently held Presidential election in Afghanistan on 5 April 2014 is significant, as this is the third national election since the ouster of the Taliban in 2001 and the first in which a transfer of power will take place through a democratic process. Despite the Taliban threat to boycott the polls, a high voter turnout of 58 per cent is noteworthy.¹ The incumbent President Hamid Karzai who did not contest the election as he was constitutionally barred, has proudly summed up the election process by stating, “Today, we have proved to the world that this is a people driven country.”² Since no candidate was able to gain more than 50 per cent of votes in the preliminary results, a second-round run-off between top two candidates, i.e. Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani, is scheduled to take place in June 2014. The election showcases the capacity and strength of the Afghan people and the institutions to take the election process to its logical conclusion.

As Afghanistan is in the process of transition, challenges before the war-torn country are myriad. The Afghan Taliban will continue to remain an important factor in Afghanistan’s security calculus, and the failure to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table highlights the difficulties in charting a negotiated political settlement. With the postponement of Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) and absence of any regional agreement to prevent proxy wars, one believes, the new leader will have to face challenges from different fronts. In this context, the paper analyses post-election security challenges in Afghanistan.

The Background

The roots of the present predicaments in Afghanistan lie in its troubled past. Historically, the first mention of the area, currently known as Afghanistan, occurs in the Zoroastrian scriptures recorded during the reign of Cyrus the great (530 B.C.). It is a remarkably old country founded as a kingdom by the Pashto tribal chiefs exactly two centuries before the birth of its immediate southern neighbour, Pakistan, and the independence of India. Ahmad Shah from the Abdali tribe was selected as the first king of the Afghans in 1747 by the Pashto tribes.³ During the colonial era, British India and Russia treated it as a buffer state. Its independence was secured by King Amanullah in 1920, but it remained under the umbrella of British imperialism until they left the subcontinent in 1947.⁴ During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union tried to turn Afghanistan into their sphere of influence; this led to bloody war in 1979 between the US- backed Mujahidin forces and the Soviet-backed Afghan government. After the end of that war, to control the immoral, debauch and corrupt Mujahids, Taliban under Mullah Omer was formed. The pashtun dominated Taliban rule was challenged by warlords belonging to other ethnic groups. This led to re-start of civil- war, which has been exacerbated since NATO and allied forces intervention in Afghanistan, after the terrorist attack on 11 September 2001 in the US. It was assumed by the Taliban, particularly Osama Bin Laden, that by attacking the US civilians devastatingly, they would succeed in convincing the US to disengage from their internal affairs. On the contrary, the terrorist attack made the US population stand more firmly behind the administrators' intervention in Afghanistan. However, after more than a decade of involvement in Afghanistan and killing of Osama Bin Laden, NATO forces have decided to withdraw from the country by the end of 2014.

The quagmire in Afghanistan underlines its demographic composition. Demographically, the population of Afghanistan is diverse. It constitutes of 40 per cent Pashtos, 25 per cent Tajiks, 20 per cent Hazaras and 6 per cent Uzbeks.⁵ It also has other minor ethnic groups like the Aimaks, the Turks and the Balochs.⁶ Thus, Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic society, with a long history of inter-ethnic and inter-clan wars. The war among them is to dominate over political, social and economic resources of Afghanistan. Therefore, any chance for established peace requires their equal participation in decision-making process. It would be a challenge for the government of Afghanistan to facilitate any such arrangement. Further, it would also be a challenge to involve neighbouring countries in Afghanistan, after the withdrawal of NATO forces, for the cooperation would not be devoid of conflict of interests.

The Security Challenges

By all indicators, Afghanistan fits into the category of failed states. According to TV Paul, a ‘failed state’ is a state that has failed in all crucial aspects of state strength, i.e. security, welfare and legitimacy. Such a state may have limited control over its territory. It depends heavily on foreign finance and military for its existence. Afghanistan is the closest case in South Asia as it survives largely through external support, and has limited or no control over vast chunk of its territory.⁷ The security environment in 2001 and 2002 was chaotic largely because the Afghan state had ceased to function. There was an anarchic security situation.⁸ Currently, the state functions, but its power does not extend beyond Kabul. Three decades of war made Afghanistan one of the world’s ‘most dangerous’ countries to live in. While the international community is re-building the war torn Afghanistan, extremists groups such as Haqqani network and Hezbi Islami are actively involved in a nationwide Taliban-led insurgency,⁹ which includes assassinations and suicide attacks. According to the United Nations, the insurgents were responsible for 80 per cent of civilian casualties in 2011 and 2012.¹⁰ While the challenges to peace and security are many, the solutions however are extremely limited and difficult to reach in the time-lines that have been set.

Political stability in Afghanistan remains poor, with an ongoing campaign of insurgency by various groups; chief among these are the Taliban, mainly Pashtun groups that ruled most of Afghanistan on Islamic-fundamentalist principles between 1995 and 2001.¹¹ The uncertainty created by the shifting of responsibility for security to Afghan forces and the withdrawal of international troops in 2014 reflects the likelihood of fragmentation of the state and the chance of continued internal conflict remains high, despite pledges of support for Afghanistan by foreign governments. The fundamentalist Taliban and some self perpetuating warlords in Afghanistan consider democracy as anti-Islamist and prefer political uncertainty and a weak dispensation in Kabul in their bid to re-capture the power.¹²

The international coalition fighting in Afghanistan has long planned on handing over the responsibility for security to local Afghan forces. But the original idea was that before doing so, a troop ‘surge’ would clear the Taliban from strategically critical terrain and weaken the insurgency¹³ so much that the war would be close to a finish by the time the Afghans took over. That never happened. The surge made important progress, but the tight deadlines for the U.S. withdrawal and

the Taliban's resilience have left insurgents in control of enough territory to remain militarily viable well after 2014. Afghan government forces will thus inherit a more demanding job than expected.

Since the Taliban is unlikely to be defeated, the only realistic alternative for an eventual defeat is a negotiated settlement. The administration has pursued such a deal for well over a year; but so far the process has yielded little. Further, there is widespread skepticism about the talks. This is not surprising considering that in the past five years the Afghan government and the international community have been largely unsuccessful, and that such efforts have become ever more daunting as the security transition process enters its last phase and the international community is set to withdraw by the end of 2014 irrespective of the scenario that emerges between the Afghan government and the insurgency by the end of this year. At this juncture, ground reality shows that the Taliban is in a state of resurgence instead of being weakened by the peace process. However, the U.S. commander in Afghanistan General Joseph Dunford and other military leaders have said that the Taliban insurgency no longer constitutes an "existential threat" to the stability of the Afghan government.¹⁴ By this they mean that the Taliban might continue to launch attacks, such as those that have occurred in Kabul in recent weeks, but the insurgency lacks the strength to cause political collapse.

The withdrawal of International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) is likely to be accompanied by a reduction in financial assistance to the Afghan government. Not only that, if they withdrew, their contribution to the Afghan economy would severely decrease. Further, it could leave the Afghan troops alone to deal with the Taliban insurgency which would worsen the security situation. NATO allies have expressed their commitment to provide around US\$ 4bn annually to support Afghanistan's armed forces after 2014, and in addition nearly US\$ 4bn in non-military assistance annually in 2015-17.¹⁵ However, the details of this assistance remain under negotiation and subject to domestic pressures in many donor countries.

Afghanistan's stability has come into question as international troops are withdrawing and President Hamid Karzai refuses to sign an agreement with the United States that would keep U.S. troops in the country after 2014. The current ISAF mission concludes at the end of the year, and the United States and its partners have a smaller post-2014 training and security mission pending the

signing of the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA).¹⁶ The BSA is widely regarded as a confidence booster for international commitments to Afghan security, both for Afghans and for the wider region. The sticking points in the agreement are the U.S. demands to establish 10 permanent military bases on Afghan soil, immunity from prosecution for American servicemen, and unrestrained night raids and house searches. In return, Washington would give economic assistance to the Afghan government. Afghans are suspicious of Washington's motives underline the demands.

On the other hand, the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) may have the numbers and reports suggest that they are performing well; however, it does not guarantee they will operate successfully in a post-US withdrawal environment, especially if the US leaves in a scenario that is politically unsatisfactory for all sides. The ANSF lacks heavy weaponry, air power and sophisticated intelligence capability.

The other challenge is that as the international community withdraws and their role downsizes, the regional role will increase, since most of Afghanistan's neighbours will try to fill the vacuum. Their role can either be unilateral or cooperative. In order to pre-empt the risk of neighbours' interfering in Afghan affairs and impose their interests, the region needs to work on a consensus and coordination basis. Regional powers such as China, India and Russia, therefore, need to take a lead to ensure that neighbours work on the principles of the Istanbul Declaration of 2011, many of which were also enshrined in the Declaration of Good Neighbourliness in 2002.¹⁷ As the largest regional donor and with a close relationship of trust with the Afghan Government and people, India is well placed to play a larger role in mobilizing regional support than it has thus far. However, one critical factor that will impinge the peace process in Afghanistan is the relationship between India and Pakistan. As long as the two countries play a zero-sum rather than a positive sum game, it will result into negative outcome. Within such scenario, one of the two countries may gain more than the other in the short term; however, over in the long run both will miss out on critical opportunities for transformation, peace and stability, and the increasing welfare of over a billion people.

Conclusion

Rasul Baksh Rais (2011) writes that the Afghan war is one of those wars in which every actor involved, sooner or later, has lost. The Soviet Union collapsed, the Kabul regime withered away

with communism and the Mujahidin factions fought for years, paving way for the Taliban. The US faced the attacks on September 11, 2001; the Taliban was in turn forced out from power and Pakistan continues to face legacies of terrorism and of the Taliban insurgency in the tribal regions.¹⁸

Currently, there can be two possible solutions to the Afghan crisis. Most of the post-US withdrawal debates are one-sided and focus on how to secure interests of a particular country instead of how to establish peace in war ravaged Afghanistan. First solution is to leave this country on its fate, with no policies or political formulae decided by the outsiders. 'Leave alone' policy could possibly motivate Taliban to reinvigorate itself; the warlords might start fighting among themselves; and the country will be on the verge of complete collapse. The churning process may take years, decades or even more. These will not be new things taking place in the history of the modern nation-states. Almost all states have passed through internal churning; for instance, after decolonization almost all countries of the developing world fell into hands of brutal military dictators, but people arose and fought back and took their own decisions in formation of government and resolution of other critical issues, without any significant help from outside powers. Afghanistan may possibly go through the same. There are possibilities that due to Afghanistan's location there will be a spill over effect on its neighbours, which could be effectively managed.

However, there is another solution which invites cooperation among countries, involved in Afghanistan. The US, India, China etc. have their economic interests in Afghanistan, while Pakistan has strategic interests. The stakeholders are not ready to cooperate between them to establish peace in Afghanistan. In this situation, contests, competition and clashes in post-withdrawal Afghanistan are inevitable. Once that starts Afghanistan will, after a gap of time, get back to post-1979 or post-9/11 mode. For instance India and Pakistan are two major players in Afghanistan securing their respective interests. India wants to secure its economic interests while Pakistan, in its strategic interests, does not want India to settle down in Afghanistan. To unsettle India, Pakistan has used various means, and can use all available means in future. One of their effective means has been to use terrorist groups to carry out attacks. Carlotta Gall has established the fact about the symbiotic relationship between a few members of Pakistani intelligence agency ISI and Haqqani group.¹⁹ This would increase tensions between the two nuclear neighbours, which may lead them to either fight directly or use the Afghan groups to fight their covert war. In both situations, Afghanistan would

suffer. Thus, cooperation among the major stakeholders in general and between India and Pakistan in particular, is a pre-requisite for establishing peace in Afghanistan.

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Endnotes:

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