



## **Afghanistan's Fragile Political Transition & Peace Deal: Shifting Goal Posts**

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### **Abstract**

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In a dramatic turn of events following the conduct of presidential elections in September 2019 and signing of the US-Taliban peace deal on February 29, Afghanistan witnessed two presidential inauguration ceremonies on 9 March. While President Ghani had been declared a winner, Dr. Abdullah too staked his claims: this high drama took place just a day before the scheduled intra-Afghan dialogue with the Taliban, the next step in the U.S.-Afghan peace deal. As the political wrangling and jockeying for power occurs, the Taliban are bound to take advantage of the lack of unity among the political elite in Kabul endangering the fragile democratic experiment that the international community has invested in the past 19 years. President Trump, on the other hand, would like to project the 'peace deal' with the Taliban and withdrawal of U.S. troops as a 'success' in ending America's longest war for his reelection bid in November this year. Will this rush to exit and disunity in Kabul provide the space for an emboldened Taliban and their allies to consolidate their position and enhance their bargaining potential? Will the coming days witness Taliban move beyond its proclaimed objective of power-sharing and gradually attempting for complete domination? The fragile political transition and the timing of the peace deal pose serious questions for the long-term peace and stability of the conflict-ridden country.

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## Analysis

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### Contested Elections and Questions of Legitimacy

The much-awaited results of the presidential elections in Afghanistan, held on 28 September 2019, were announced by the Independent Election Commission (IEC) on 18 February after a five-month long hiatus, amidst allegations of fraud and irregularities.<sup>1</sup> Incumbent President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani was declared winner.<sup>2</sup> Timing of this announcement coincided with the move towards a peace deal between the United States (U.S.) and the Taliban, setting the stage for withdrawal of American troops. This peace deal, seen by many as 'exit deal' scripted by the U.S., to help President Donald Trump's reelection bid.

However, far from bringing the contested electoral results to a closure, the IEC's announcement set in motion a series of reactions from the opposition leaders and the Taliban that could pave the way for further instability. Moreover, this bitter contestation impacts crucially on the representative character and legitimacy of the President's office in Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup>

The conduct of presidential elections was delayed from April to 28 September 2019. There were talks of forming an 'interim government' as a prerequisite for the signing of the peace deal with the Taliban in the summer of 2019. After such attempts failed in September, elections were held with very little time for preparations leading to allegations of fraud and irregularities between the two main candidates. In 2014, a carefully mediated deal by then U.S. secretary of state John Kerry had brought the two opposing camps of Ghani and Dr. Abdullah together under the National Unity Government (NUG). The novel nomenclature notwithstanding, unity remained the absent entity. I, then in Afghanistan, witnessed from close quarters how lack of unity and contrasting views of both camps on major issues affected the government's functioning. Moreover, this experiment never received the approval by the constitutional *loya jirgah*. The tenure of the NUG, therefore, lacked credibility, reinforcing the Taliban narrative of not negotiating with a 'puppet government'. Moreover, the government in Kabul was hardly able to deliver of basic services leaving large swathes of territory to come under insurgent influence and onslaught.

### Parallel Government and Internal Fissures

The IEC's announcement had been rejected by the former Chief executive and Ghani's prime opponent, Dr. Abdullah. On 18 February, he claimed victory and declared his intentions to establish an 'inclusive' government. Earlier his supporters had called to announce a 'parallel government' if the election results are announced despite the alleged fraudulent votes.<sup>4</sup> This proposal received the backing of several prominent political figures including General Abdul Rashid Dostum, a key political figure and former warlord for the northern Afghan provinces. Other supporters of the parallel government included Ahmad Zia Massoud, brother of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the Islamic Jamiat Party of Afghanistan led by Salahuddin Rabbani, the National Unity Party of

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<sup>1</sup> Marked by allegations of fraud and the curious case of 300,000 controversial votes which the IEC never explained, the conduct of free and fair elections along with deepening of democracy remains a huge challenge in Afghanistan.

<sup>2</sup> According to the IEC, Ghani secured 50.64 percent of votes, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar received 39.53 percent and 3.85 percent votes respectively.

<sup>3</sup> The total turnout in the election was 1,823,948 which makes less than five percent of Afghanistan's population if the whole population is estimated to be around 40 million. Ghani's vote share amounts to less than 2.5 percent of the nation's votes.

<sup>4</sup> "Afghan leaders endorse a 'parallel government' concept in case of fraudulent election results", *Khaama Press*, 17 February 2020. <https://www.khaama.com/afghan-leaders-endorse-a-parallel-government-concept-in-case-of-fraudulent-election-results-6876895/>. Accessed on 15 March 2020.



Afghanistan led by Sayed Mansoor Naderi and the Islamic Solidarity Party of Afghanistan led by Haji Mohammad Mohaqeq.

In the face of an impending political deadlock, the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad attempted in vain to broker a deal, a day ahead of the scheduled intra-Afghan dialogue. Abdullah demanded an executive prime minister's post to oversee the peace process, and sixty percent of the political posts in the government, which Ghani rejected. Ghani's proposal, on the other hand, included a power-sharing plan with Abdullah in the areas of security, governance and peace. Ghani offered 40 percent of his cabinet, including one National Security Council member post, to be filled with Abdullah allies, and he also offered the chairmanship of a "Supreme Peace Council" to Abdullah, which would engage in negotiations with the Taliban. These remained unacceptable to Abdullah.<sup>5</sup>

The Taliban strongly reacted to re-election of Ghani and called the election process 'fake and unlawful'. The group's statement read, "Holding elections and announcing oneself a president under occupation shall never remedy the problems of our Muslim Afghan nation just as it has failed to do so over the past nineteen years."<sup>6</sup> For the group, the fractured politics over election results and the peace process, is a point of advantage.

### Peace or Exit Deal?

On 29 February, the U.S. and the Taliban representatives signed the peace agreement in Doha. The group had reportedly adhered to the agreed condition for a week-long (22nd to 28th) reduction in violence (RIV). As per the agreement, the U.S. will establish a joint monitoring body to assess progress on the commitments. The Afghan government would release 5,000 Taliban prisoners in exchange of 1,000 members of the Afghan security forces held by the Taliban, before both sides sit down for direct negotiations. The U.S. will also review sanctions it has on Taliban members and start diplomatic efforts with the United Nations to remove the penalties. The two sides also agreed to a gradual, conditions-based withdrawal over 14 months. In the first phase, about 5,000 troops are to leave within 135 days. The Taliban also agreed to not let the soil of Afghanistan to be used by terrorist groups against the U.S. and its allies. However, much less is known of two secret annexes<sup>7</sup> of the deal, in which the Taliban reportedly set the criteria of when and how the U.S. troops would leave the country, raising concerns not only among the U.S. members of congress but also other capitals.

The deal which has interesting parallels with the previous Paris Accords (a peace treaty signed by the U.S. to end the Vietnam War in 1973) has been damned as an abject surrender to the Taliban. While it may boost Trump's domestic electoral campaign, subsequent days have demonstrated the complexities of implementing the deal. Although some Taliban leaders in the past have declared the changed world view of the group with regard to women rights, girls' education etc., the core ideology of the group remains unchanged. The deal, for the Taliban, is merely a strategic move to achieve their end objective of sharing power, which may gradually evolve into a full-scale domination.

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<sup>5</sup> "Have the 24-Hours of Non-Stop Negotiations Failed?", *Tolo News*, 9 March 2020, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/have-24-hours-non-stop-negotiations-failed>. Accessed on 11 March 2020.

<sup>6</sup> "Taliban strongly reacts to re-election of Ghani as the President of Afghanistan", *Khama Press*, 18 February 2020, <https://www.khaama.com/taliban-strongly-reacts-to-re-election-of-ghani-as-the-president-of-afghanistan-04463/>. Accessed on 11 March 2020.

<sup>7</sup> David E. Sanger, Eric Schmitt and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "A Secret Accord With the Taliban: When and How the U.S. Would Leave Afghanistan", *The New York Times*, 8 March 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/08/world/asia/taliban-afghanistan-annexes-peace-agreement.html>. Accessed on 10 March 2020.



### Reduction in Violence & Trust Deficit

'Reduction in violence', which the Taliban duly observed, falls drastically short of the complete ceasefire that the Afghan government has been calling for. To make matters worse, violence started immediately after the deal was signed. Al Jazeera reported 'nearly 80 attacks'<sup>8</sup> by the Taliban within a week targeting mostly Afghan security forces and civilians. On 9 March, a rocket aimed at the presidential palace was fired marring the swearing in ceremony of Ghani. Some analysts sought to explain this pointing at the fragmented nature of insurgency. However, even the U.S. termed the level of violence as unacceptable, while accepting the fact that insurgent attacks on NATO forces have come to a halt.<sup>9</sup>

It is obvious that in the absence of a permanent ceasefire, the 100-day intra-Afghan dialogue would have to be held under a specter of violence. The dialogue would have little meaning if the insurgents target the opponents of the peace deal. There are concerns that release of 5000 prisoners would only add to the military strength of the Taliban before spring for another offensive. The group's rejection of an Afghan government demand of providing written guarantees that the released prisoners would not revert to fighting, has not helped. Although the insurgents may still abide by its assurances of not carrying out suicide attacks, continuing violence per se may sufficiently dampen the process of looking for ways to establish peace. Not surprisingly, the Ghani government tried to delay the release of imprisoned Taliban cadres. It is obvious that in addition to expressing its displeasure for having been sidelined in the peace process, it carries little trust in the Taliban's commitments to peace.

### Intra-Afghan Dialogue & (Dis)unity in Kabul

The intra-Afghan talks is expected to bring the Taliban together with a wide range of Afghan leaders, including government officials for consensus building. The Taliban refuse to recognize the Kabul government. A previous peace dialogue in Russia that had witnessed similar participation of Afghan political elites did not, however, show any progress. Will it be any different this time remains to be seen. The anti-Ghani sentiment may have united a large number of Afghan elites including former President Hamid Karzai under one umbrella making the Taliban amenable for negotiations. But will that unity last when pitched against the Taliban's uncompromised worldview on the constitution, elections, political institutions, justice, governance, and minorities and women's rights, remains an important question.

Internal fissures and polarization are likely to be exploited by the Taliban. Competition for one upmanship in which some of these leaders may either endorse or reject the peace process may introduce additional bottlenecks. The credence of the talk of a parallel government by Abdullah and other power brokers may actually dilute the Afghan government's credibility as well as willingness to be a part of the peace process. This could be a 'bargaining strategy' as the Afghan elites are jockeying for power and influence in the changing political dynamics that are being played out in Kabul and other regional capitals. In the event of the Taliban looking increasingly to dominate, the powerbrokers may defect to the side of the probable winner.

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<sup>8</sup> "Afghanistan-Taliban talks at risk as unrest continues", *Al Jazeera*, 7 March 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/afghanistan-taliban-talks-risk-unrest-continues-200307130554687.html>. Accessed on 13 March 2020.

<sup>9</sup> "U.S. Says Level Of Violence In Afghanistan Unacceptable For Peace Process", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 11 March 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/u-s-says-level-of-violence-in-afghanistan-unacceptable-for-peace-process/30480848.html>. Accessed on 13 March 2020.



## Divisions Within the Taliban

For the Taliban, the deal is important from the point of their long and winding war with the NATO and Afghan forces, without an end in sight. The deal, they hope, would eventually lead to the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan and more importantly, bring them closer to regaining political power in Kabul, without having to fight for both objectives.

With over 60,000 fighting cadres, the Taliban today is probably the strongest compared to any point of time in their entire existence. However, at the same time, it is not a monolithic organization of pre-2001 days. Deputy leader of Taliban, Sirajuddin Haqqani penned an opinion piece in *The New York Times* on 20 February 2020 testifying the group's "commitment to ending the hostilities and bringing peace"<sup>10</sup> However, this would mean agreeing to work within the current political system for an extended period of time and making some compromises. To many of the Taliban's key actors this might look, however strategic in intent, as a sellout. Not surprisingly, a key component of the insurgency, the Peshawar Shura, which functions as its military wing has not conceded to give up fighting.

One of the factions is led by Mullah Mohammad Rasoul, the former governor of Nimroz province during the Taliban rule (1996-2001). Rasoul split with the Taliban group in 2015 after it became public that the group's leader Mullah Mohamad Omar had been long dead. Reportedly supported by the Afghan government, the Rasoul faction, known as the Renouncers, is active mostly in Helmand province and has fought the Taliban in Herat, Farah, Nimroz and Ghor provinces.<sup>11</sup> Rasoul has reportedly criticized the peace deal. In a statement in January 2020, following the killing of Mullah Mohammad Nangyalai, a regional commander of the faction in a U.S. drone attack, the group had issued a statement saying that it will continue to fight the U.S. and other forces.<sup>12</sup>

Afghan security and defence sources have previously pointed at the existence of 20 terrorist groups within Afghanistan including the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K).<sup>13</sup> The latter has carried out a series of attacks on the Taliban in the eastern provinces and the Shia population in the past including a major attack in the week following the peace deal. On 6 March, 32 people were killed as the group attacked a memorial ceremony held in honor of Abdul Ali Mazari, an ethnic Hazara political leader who was killed by the Taliban in 1995. Dr. Abdullah who was attending the ceremony managed to escape. Earlier on 27 February, the group exploded a bicycle bomb in Kabul killing a civilian and injuring at least ten others.

The peace deal may have little impact on the operations of these groups. At one level, the Taliban are now seen as a useful tool to fight the IS-K, which contains elements of the Taliban deserters. At the other, drawdown of U.S. forces may even provide a boost to the IS-K and others. According to the terms of the peace deal, the

<sup>10</sup> Sirajuddin Haqqani, "What We, the Taliban, Want", *The New York Times*, 20 February 2020,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/opinion/taliban-afghanistan-war-haqqani.html>. Accessed on 14 March 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Taimoor Shah, Rod Nordland and Jawad Sukhanyar, "Afghan Government Quietly Aids Breakaway Taliban Faction", *The New York Times*, 19 June 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/19/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-faction-renouncers.html>. Accessed on 14 March 2019.

<sup>12</sup> J P Lawrence, "Airstrike in western Afghanistan kills leader of Taliban splinter group, may have killed civilians", *Star and Stripes*, 9 January 2020, <https://www.stripes.com/news/airstrike-in-western-afghanistan-kills-leader-of-taliban-splinter-group-may-have-killed-civilians-1.614105>. Accessed on 14 March 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Abdul Wali Arian, "20 Terrorist Groups Fighting Against Afghan Government", *Tolo News*, 26 February 2017, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/20-terrorist-groups-fighting-against-afghan-government>. Accessed on 14 February 2020.



Taliban have agreed not to let the use the soil of Afghanistan by any terrorist group against U.S. and its allies. Will that assurance cover the non-U.S. ally countries like India remains unknown.

### **Prognosis**

The return of the Taliban to the seat of power in Kabul following a complete U.S. pull out may still be beyond its reach militarily. Assuming that the Afghan security forces remain intact, the Taliban cannot expect to easily overrun the country as they did in the 1990s, not just for the scale of violence Afghanistan will witness, but due to the fact that the country has grown strategically important for Washington due to the latter's relations with neighbouring Iran, Russia, China and Pakistan. There are talks of retaining a limited number of troops for counter-terrorism (CT) and other (CT plus) purposes, an idea that has been categorically rejected by the Taliban.

In the days to come, Afghanistan is bound to witness increasing polarization and instability. Talks of the emergence of a Northern Alliance 2.0 have resurfaced with Russia, Iran and Turkey sending their representatives for Dr. Abdullah's swearing in ceremony. However, for this to materialize contentious group of actors will have to act and work like a cohesive political and military force in opposing the Taliban. As the latter starts dominating, its allies and followers may simply swell, scuttling imaginations of the formation of an opposing bloc and prompting some of the Afghan power brokers to consider defecting to the winning side. If disunity prevails among the Afghan political elites, the Taliban could emerge dominant through diplomatic means, i.e. eventually getting its emirate in negotiations.

As Afghanistan, traverses through a painful political and democratic transition, the international community needs to be better prepared to deal with the complexities and implications of holding elections in a conflict zone. Fraud marred elections have done little service to the gigantic and challenging task of political and democratic institution building. The installation of a President amidst bitter contestations reflects poorly on the mammoth, expensive and risky exercises of holding elections and the countries who fund these efforts. Until Afghanistan's institutional capabilities are built, instability and chaos will be a norm. Externally brokered peace deals with their inherent limitations cannot be provide a solution. The solution must emerge from within. The question is whether the Afghans who could make it happen are capable of it.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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