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Post-Election Challenges for the New Government in Kabul

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Introduction

With a new President—Ashraf Ghani—finally in place in Kabul, attention can shift from the protracted electoral process to the challenges likely to confront the new government. The ability of this government to deal with various political and security challenges will depend to a large extent on how it manages its relations with a variety of stakeholders.

Reviving the peace process with the Taliban is likely to be among the top priorities of the new government. The need for a political settlement with the insurgents has become all the more important given the impending drawdown of foreign forces from the region by the end of 2014 and persisting doubts about the capability of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The military drawdown, likely to be accompanied by a similar waning of interest and financial commitment, also makes it imperative for the new leaders in Kabul to persuade regional countries like India, Iran and China to increase their engagement with Afghanistan. Among the neighbours, dealing with Pakistan and its policy towards Afghanistan is likely to be a formidable challenge for the new government.

While all these problems confronted the previous regime in Kabul as well, President Ghani could face a possible new threat from within the government itself. As difficult as the other challenges may be, keeping the government together and maintaining a good working relationship between the President and the Chief Executive will likely prove to be an extremely onerous task.

This Issue Brief seeks to explore the prospects and problems for the new government in Afghanistan with respect to managing three sets of relations. The first is between the two leaders and their respective positions: Navigating this dynamic is crucial for the smooth functioning, and the very

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existence, of the Government of National Unity. The second is with the Taliban, which continues to pose a serious security threat. The last set of relations concerns the regional countries China, India, Iran and Pakistan.

The Government of National Unity

At the core of the settlement between President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, which ensured that the political stalemate could end and the final result be announced, was the agreement to form a Government of National Unity (GNU). The agreement provides for the creation of a new post of Chief Executive Officer (CEO), which could be recognised as the post of Prime Minister following the convening of a Loya Jirga in 2016. The Jirga will also be called upon to amend the Constitution. While the agreement grants the CEO with a host of powers and authority, it also clearly states that he shall remain answerable to the President.

The President will head the cabinet, which includes the Vice Presidents, the CEO, and his two deputies and the cabinet ministers. A new body, the Council of Ministers, will be created, which will be headed by the CEO and will comprise of the cabinet ministers as members. This council will be responsible for implementing the executive affairs of the government.

Efforts have also been made to ensure that there is a degree of parity when it comes to the allocation of key ministries. Consequently, the two teams will be equally represented in the National Security Council at the leadership level, and equitably represented at the membership level.¹

In the long run it is hoped that the creation of a CEO will introduce a degree of decentralisation in a system that is highly centralised at present. The presidential system, as practised in Afghanistan, concentrated an overwhelming amount of power in the office of the President. It is felt that an additional Prime Ministerial-type of a position and a functional distribution of power between the two positions could ensure greater checks and balances within the system.²

However, for this long-term objective to be achieved, it is critical that the system functions smoothly. Afghanistan has a chequered history of power-sharing agreements. In the 1990s, the Islamabad and Peshawar Accords, both of which provided for a coalition government and the position of Prime Minister, were short-lived. At that time, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who was offered the position of Prime Minister, refused to abide by the terms of the agreements, as he felt that his position was too subordinate to that of the President.

While in this case there is a degree of parity between the two positions, the durability of the current power-sharing agreement is still contingent on the level of cooperation and trust between the two leaders. Even the text of the agreement states that the relationship between the two positions would depend largely on “the commitment of both sides to partnership, collegiality, [and] collaboration.”

There is no legal framework at the moment to fall back upon in case of any violation of the agreement.³

It is important to note that this system of dual heads has not been in the making for the past few years but was created especially to break the political deadlock caused by the contentious electoral process. Both sides have had to make significant concessions given that both felt that they should have won the election outright. This sense of having to settle is likely to be felt more by Abdullah than Ghani, as he eventually accepted the subordinate position. Throughout the negotiations regarding the division of power, Abdullah was keen to ensure that the position of CEO has as much power as possible and would not be reduced to a mere ceremonial position. Ghani, on the other hand, was looking to safeguard the predominance of the President's office. Their respective positions suggested a possible premature acceptance of the final electoral outcome and an attempt to safeguard their respective interests.

The resilience of the agreement is likely to depend not only on the level of cooperation, but also on how far Ghani is perceived by the other camp to be fulfilling the terms of the agreement. Thus, there is always the danger that any major disagreement or attempt by the President to expand his powers or deviate from the agreement could provoke an adverse reaction, which at the least could derail the working of the government, and at worst, could lead Abdullah or his supporters to walk out of the government altogether.

Months of bitter campaigning have raised concerns about the prospects for cooperation between the two leaders. Differences between the two leaders reportedly delayed the formation of the cabinet, thereby missing the 45-day deadline set by the President to complete this task.⁴ The fact that both come from highly contrasting backgrounds has also raised further doubts. Ghani, a Pashtun, is a technocrat who lived for years in the West and worked with the World Bank. Abdullah, meanwhile, is perceived as a Tajik,⁵ who gained his political experience as a close confidante of Ahmed Shah Massoud and as part of the resistance to the Soviet Union in the 1980s and the Taliban in the 1990s. Overall, however, there are reasons to remain optimistic. Both Ghani and Abdullah have worked with each other in the past. They were both a part of former President Hamid Karzai's government, where Ghani served as the Finance Minister (2002 to 2004) and Abdullah, the Foreign Minister (2001 to 2005). They are reported to enjoy cordial relations with each other despite their differences over the past few months.

There is also a great degree of convergence on certain critical issues. For example, both are in favour of continued US military presence in the country post-2014, as evident from the signing of the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) just days after the swearing-in of the new government. Moreover, both of them acknowledge the importance of sustained international and regional support for at least another decade to sustain Afghanistan. Another priority for both leaders is to pursue negotiations to resolve the deadlock with the Taliban.⁶

The contrasting backgrounds of Ghani and Abdullah could also work in their favour. While Ghani's experience as a technocrat has led to a belief that he may not have the requisite skills to navigate through Afghanistan's complex political system, and Abdullah's association with leaders and warlords of the 1990s civil war has often been held against him, the political experience and technical expertise of the two together could provide the right balance. This may not only be more acceptable to the general populace but may also enable the new government to meet the future challenges more effectively.

While the two may still be able to develop a working relationship with each other, how well they manage to control their own respective support bases will also be crucial for the smooth functioning of the government. In Afghanistan, where a patronage system continues to thrive and underpins power and authority, government positions are seen as 'spoils' and a means of rewarding supporters.⁷ Both Ghani and Abdullah made promises during the election campaign to a number of regional powerbrokers to secure their support; now, with a unity government in place, government positions have to be shared amongst supporters of both parties. As a result, both Ghani and Abdullah face the extremely difficult task of accommodating their supporters within this new arrangement. It remains to be seen how factions or individuals who feel short-changed, or completely excluded from such benefits, would react and affect the functioning of the government.

Reconciliation with the Taliban

The new government has also inherited a fragile peace process from its predecessor. Over the past few years, the Afghan government and the international community have made concerted efforts to reach a political settlement with the Taliban. Despite numerous efforts, however, little progress has been achieved. The Afghan High Peace Council, the government body entrusted with the task of coordinating these talks, admitted in September 2014 that the process has been a failure. The Council reported that it has “not been successful in restoring peace or talking with Mullah Omar and other Taliban leaders.”⁸ Even Karzai, in his farewell speech, admitted that his “relentless peace efforts” had failed.⁹

The new government has already indicated its willingness to engage with the Taliban. During his inaugural ceremony, Ghani called upon the Taliban and all other militant groups to join the peace process and find an end to the violence in the country through negotiations.¹⁰ Both Ghani and Abdullah, during the course of their electoral campaigns, also pushed forward the idea of reaching out to the Taliban. While Abdullah stressed the importance of “genuine, serious negotiations,” Ghani claimed that the Taliban “are a fact” of Afghanistan.¹¹

The new government, however, is likely to start on the back foot as far as the reconciliation process is concerned. Soon after the announcement of the deal between the two leaders, the Taliban issued a statement denouncing them as the “new American employees for the Kabul administration.” The

Taliban view these “bogus elections, its shameful process and the coming about of a unity government as an American plot and neutralizing it as obligation of each and every Muslim.”¹²

In an earlier statement issued in July 2014, the Taliban had claimed that Ghani will emerge victorious in the elections on account of America's support for him, as he was the best placed—given his educational background and past stay in the US—to carry out their agenda within Afghanistan.¹³ The Taliban has persistently condemned the elections as an illegitimate process, as they are taking place under “foreign occupation” and consequently the “selection” is made by the US, and not by the Afghans. In his Eid message in July, Mullah Omar had criticised the elections as a “fake process”. As “power is in the hands of the invaders,” the elections are seen as an instrument for implementing the US agenda through its “internal allies” with no consideration for the interests of Afghanistan or its people.¹⁴

The Taliban had constantly denounced Hamid Karzai as a western puppet and had used this criticism to reject any direct talks with the Afghan government. Statements from the Taliban so far suggest that they are likely to view the new leaders in Kabul through the same prism and may use this as a pretext to reject overtures from them. According to Afghanistan's Ambassador to the UN, “the Taliban are renouncing” the government's peace offer.¹⁵

It is possible that such statements are meant only for public consumption and may not necessarily imply that the government has no scope for engaging with the insurgents. There exist many differences within the Taliban and a number of factions have been amenable to the idea of talking to the government. Reports about secret, back-channel talks between the government and Taliban officials have also occasionally surfaced.¹⁶ Unfortunately, there seems to be no clarity at the moment about how powerful these factions or officials are or how representative they are of the overall movement.

Irrespective of the internal divisions within the Taliban, what is likely to make the situation tougher for the government is the existing military balance on the ground. The Taliban continues to remain resilient, and the last two years in particular have been extremely violent in Afghanistan. This is evident from the sharp increase in casualties among the civilians and the ANSF. The first six months of 2014 witnessed the deaths of 234 civilians in 147 attacks claimed by the Taliban. Afghanistan's Defence Minister has also called 2014 “the deadliest year for the ANSF.”¹⁷

The Taliban retains the ability to launch high-profile attacks throughout the country. The year 2014 has witnessed numerous attacks on the Kabul International Airport, popular and highly secured destinations in Kabul and other major cities, bases of the international and Afghan forces, convoys of presidential candidates and offices of the election commission. More importantly, the Taliban has made significant inroads into parts of eastern and southern Afghanistan this fighting season. Key districts in Ghazni, Helmand, Kandahar, Faryab, Nangarhar, Kapisa, Wardak, Logar, Kunduz,

Kunar, Nuristan, Laghman and Ghor provinces have either been captured by the Taliban or are constantly under attack by the insurgents.¹⁸

The threat from the Taliban is likely to intensify further, post-2014. President Ghani's decision to sign the BSA with the US and the Status of Forces Agreement with NATO within days of taking office is a positive development. These agreements allow the US and NATO to retain a residual force in Afghanistan post-2014. Although this residual force is expected to primarily serve in an advisory and training capacity, roughly 1,800 US troops have been earmarked to carry out counterterrorism operations against the remnants of al Qaeda and the Taliban.¹⁹

However, the number of foreign troops that will be retained in Afghanistan beyond 2014 will be significantly reduced. Estimates suggest that the total number of US troops in Afghanistan will be less than 10,000, which will be reduced by half by 2015 and then to 1,000 in 2016.²⁰ Given the failure of the international forces to suppress the insurgency even with the American surge of 2009-2011, there are serious doubts about the impact of a much smaller force.

The problems associated with the drawdown of foreign troops are further compounded by question marks over the capabilities of the ANSF. Although the ANSF took the lead for all security operations in the country in the summer of 2013 and has been hailed for its role in a number of successful military operations, there are doubts about its capacity to deal with security challenges on its own. The ANSF has difficulties independently managing counter-IED operations, intelligence, artillery and medical operations, and there are doubts about its capacity to manage the day-to-day affairs of running such a force.²¹ In addition, lack of appropriate lethal and non-lethal equipment, corruption, lack of proper medical care, a high rate of desertion and illiteracy continue to remain significant obstacles for the force.

The biggest challenge for the ANSF in the future is likely to be the lack of funding. It has been widely acknowledged that although the ANSF may be in a position to hold off the insurgents for now, their long-term sustainability will depend on the continuation of foreign aid. While the international community has agreed to provide \$4.1 million a year towards the funding of the ANSF, this amount is significantly lower than what has been provided annually over the past decade. Moreover, given the dwindling international interest in Afghanistan, the possibility of the pledged amount not being actually disbursed also exists. Financial restrictions could undermine the sustainability of the ANSF and lead to reductions in its overall size.

Until the military balance is appropriately addressed—which seems unlikely at the moment—the government is going to find it difficult to compel the insurgents, particularly the hardliners, to come to the negotiation table. Even if the Taliban agrees to enter into a dialogue, the government at present will not be able to negotiate from a higher vantage point.

Regional Diplomacy

India, Iran and China

After the military drawdown, regional countries like India, Iran and China are expected to play a more proactive role in the country. All three countries desire a peaceful Afghanistan and are concerned about the unfolding situation there. Even Karzai, during his last two years in office, undertook a number of high-profile visits to these countries in the hope of shoring up support for Afghanistan. Strengthening and managing ties with its neighbours is likely to receive just as much importance from the new government. Ghani's first official overseas visit as President to China should be seen in this light.

However, at this stage of uncertainties, it seems unlikely that any of these countries will be in a position to sustain their engagement with Afghanistan in the future, let alone increase it any further. It has been possible for these countries to invest in Afghanistan and be engaged with large-scale projects on account of the security provided by the foreign forces. None of these countries have contributed substantially themselves to Afghanistan's security sector. While Iran, till date, has not provided any military aid to Afghanistan, China's contribution has been restricted to training a few hundred Afghan National Police personnel.

The possibility of India filling the security vacuum in Afghanistan is also very limited. India's military assistance has been confined to the provision of equipment and the training of ANSF personnel. On both counts, India's contribution has been low. India's reluctance to provide significant military aid to Afghanistan is partly due to its concerns about the future cohesiveness of the ANSF, and partly because it wants to avoid a face-off with Pakistan. Only recently did India show some willingness to step up its military engagement by paying for Russian arms meant for the ANSF.²² However, reports in October 2014 suggesting that Ghani had withdrawn his predecessor's request for arms from India may be an indication of the new government's reluctance to accept increased military aid from New Delhi.²³

The limited military involvement is likely to affect assistance in other spheres as well. India is said to be scaling down its monetary and human resource allocation to Afghanistan, as it has not initiated any large-scale projects in the country in the past three or four years. It is finding it difficult to even complete some ongoing projects, such as the Salma Dam in western Afghanistan and its flagship project at Hajigak in central Afghanistan. Any increase of assistance to Afghanistan at present is seen by policymakers as an “overstretch.”²⁴

In China's case, its assistance to Afghanistan has been quite small even with the presence of foreign troops. Although its two flagship projects, if and when completed, will be huge sources of revenue for Afghanistan, work on both has been far from satisfactory. While the oil extraction at the Amu

Darya River Basin in northern Afghanistan was ceased in August 2013, China has been reluctant to even start work on the copper mines in Logar province, preferring to wait and assess the security situation in the region post-2014. Apart from these planned investments, China's contribution to Afghanistan has been quite miniscule. Although China assured Afghanistan of enhanced cooperation during Ghani's visit to Beijing in October 2014, the actual amount of \$327 million pledged by China is relatively low.

Despite these limitations, it is important for the new government to seek stronger ties with neighbouring regional countries. While they may not be in a position to serve as an alternative to US or Western assistance, their support to Afghanistan will continue to be extremely critical.

Pakistan

An equally daunting challenge for the new government will be that of dealing with Pakistan. The number of high-level exchanges between the two countries within weeks of President Ghani assuming office has been seen as a positive beginning. The Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif and the Chief of the ISI Lt. Gen. Rizwan Akhtar have both already visited Kabul. President Ghani made Pakistan his second official foreign trip as President, where he met Pakistan's President and Prime Minister, and visited the Pakistan army headquarters in Rawalpindi. During this two-day visit, the two countries signed agreements to improve train and road links, increase trade and explore defence, border and energy cooperation. Both countries also assured each other that they would take sterner measures against terrorist sanctuaries on their soil.

Soon after his inauguration, President Ghani had already made clear his willingness to improve relations: A spokesman for the President claimed that the “tension does not help” either of the two nations and the new government is “looking forward to...a good relationship with Pakistan.”²⁶ Ghani's decision to withdraw the request for Indian military aid has also been seen as an attempt to pacify Pakistan.²⁷ The efforts of the new leadership to reach out to Pakistan are not surprising. They clearly highlight the importance Kabul attaches to improving this bilateral relationship for overall peace and stability in Afghanistan.

However, managing ties with Pakistan has been a huge task for most governments in Kabul, and the new leader has his task cut out in this regard. The bilateral relationship is undergoing a phase of renewed tensions. The past few months have seen a number of border skirmishes between the two countries, further worsening the relationship. In June 2014, for instance, Afghanistan not only pulled out of a security meeting with Pakistan but also lodged a formal complaint by summoning Pakistan's Ambassador to Afghanistan. It then issued warnings of military action against any border violation by Pakistan.²⁸

Apart from these border incidents, Pakistan's support for the Afghan Taliban and other insurgent groups continues to be a sore point. Karzai had constantly accused Pakistan of supporting terrorism in Afghanistan and pinpointed the existence of the terror infrastructure in Pakistan as the primary reason for the insurgents' resiliency. Even in his farewell speech, Karzai claimed that peace in Afghanistan depended on Pakistan and if it wanted, peace would return to Afghanistan.²⁹ A report by the Afghan Ministry of Defence in August 2014 claimed that the Pakistan military establishment paid 30,000 Pakistani rupees to Afghan insurgents monthly in a bid to use them to destabilise Afghanistan.³⁰ The High Peace Council also blamed Pakistan's opposition to the peace process as being the main factor behind its failure.³¹ Punjabi Taliban's declaration of a ceasefire in Pakistan and claim of waging its war only in Afghanistan henceforth was seen by Kabul as being tantamount to a conspiracy by Pakistan against the stability of Afghanistan.³²

The recent tensions and historical enmity between the two countries suggest that any significant progress in bilateral ties in the short term is unlikely. Pakistan, at least since the 1970s, has followed a policy of intervening in Afghanistan's internal affairs to influence political developments in a manner that will be conducive to its interests. It has supported numerous groups over the years to achieve its objectives: the Afghan Mujahideen in the 1980s; Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in the early 1990s; and the Taliban from 1994 onwards. This interventionist policy has put Pakistan at odds with most governments in Kabul. A real breakthrough in relations will be possible only when there is a genuine shift in Pakistan's Afghanistan policy.

This is unlikely to happen until the Pakistan military continues to control Pakistan's foreign policy, especially its relations with Afghanistan, India, China and the US. There are no signs that the military is willing to cede any space to the civilian government in the domain of foreign policy. The recent protests in Pakistan may have further reduced the already narrow manoeuvring space that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had.

Only a shift in the Pakistan military's strategic thinking could warrant a new approach to Afghanistan. While there may be a realisation that a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan is neither desirable nor achievable, Rawalpindi's objectives vis-à-vis Afghanistan have remained largely consistent—a regime favourable to Pakistan, which will not raise the Pashtunistan issue and will ensure a weakening of India's influence in Afghanistan. It continues to see the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network as the only factions in Afghanistan that could help Rawalpindi secure its interests. It has therefore been pushing for the Taliban to be given adequate representation in any future political setup in Afghanistan. It is for these reasons that even while the military has launched operations against militants operating out of Pakistan's tribal areas, it has chosen not to take any action against the Afghan groups.³³ And while recent media reports and statements from Pakistan have hinted at a possible shift in the Pakistan military's strategic thinking vis-à-vis Afghanistan, only time will tell whether there is a genuine and sincere shift in policy.

Conclusion

The start for the new President in Kabul has been far from an ideal one. The disputed and protracted nature of the electoral process has further reduced the time available for him to settle into his new position before the completion of the military drawdown.

The new leader, in any case, would have been confronted with a host of challenges. Even with the massive international support for the past 13 years, Hamid Karzai had found it difficult to govern Afghanistan. A combination of flawed Western strategies and improper governance ensured that Karzai's successor would inherit an extremely difficult and complex task. The resilient Taliban insurgency, a failing economy and a complex neighbourhood, set against the backdrop of the impending military drawdown and dwindling international interest, are challenges that both presidential candidates, Ghani and Abdullah, would have been bracing themselves to face even at the start of the presidential race.

The eventual electoral outcome, however, has ensured that the new President in Kabul is now faced with the additional burden of managing his equation with the Chief Executive and his appointees. This is no less a formidable challenge but it also presents a unique opportunity for both the leaders to rewrite history. Both will have to put aside personal differences for the country and its people. This is the first stepping stone towards a stable future; failure on this front could push Afghanistan into yet another turbulent and uncertain phase.

Endnotes:

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