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AFGHANISTAN ELECTIONS 2014

POSITIVE VOTE, FUTURE OF TALIBAN & THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

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About the Report

Afghanistan has been one of the primary focus of the Institute; during the recent months, the Institute has organized multiple discussions and published numerous commentaries on the subject.

Sections of this report have been published by the author as short commentaries earlier in the Institute's website and local news papers.

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AFGHANISTAN ELECTIONS 2014

POSITIVE VOTE, FUTURE OF TALIBAN & THE CHALLENGES FOR NEW PRESIDENT

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The first round of counting is over and the contest seems to be between Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani to become the next President of Afghanistan. No one would have expected that the elections would be such a success story. Undoubtedly, this was one of the most historic moments in the contemporary history of Afghanistan. Not only was this election historical, but also likely to set an important milestone in Afghanistan's transition and its progress towards becoming a democratic polity.

There was so much pessimism about the future of Afghanistan, as could be seen from the multiple reports during the last one year in terms of what would happen to Afghanistan once the international security forces leave in 2014. There were questions also about the ability of the Afghans to take the transition process ahead as the draw down comes closer. The elections is a partial, but a positive answer, signaling a slow but a steady transition.

The first round of elections in choosing the next President took place in a particular geo-political environment. Karzai's tenure as the President comes to an end with no possibility of him being elected for a third time legally. Though Karzai could not "appoint" his successor, he had allowed the electoral process to decide who would be the next President. This election was special, for the simple reason, there were not many such examples in the recent decades in the history of Afghanistan.

When was the last time, a ruler in Afghanistan, allowed an electoral process to choose his successor? Mullah Omar, Najibullah, Babrak Karmal, Nur Taraki, Daoud Khan, Zahir Shah—the history of succession in Afghanistan in the last hundred years has been more through coup, forcible ouster and exile with so much of blood shed; political and peaceful transition has never been a part of the Afghanistan's history from one rule to another. That is why this election is so important and a milestone in the history of Afghanistan.

Second, the security, political and geographic environment was not that conducive, when the elections took place during the first week of April 2014. The security situation within Afghanistan and the regional security situation outside were not too positive. Consider the following in this context: the Afghan nation is deeply polarised along the ethnic lines – the pashtuns, Uzbeks, Tajiks and the Hazaras. The internal peace process vis-a-vis the Taliban has not made any major breakthrough; nor there has been a great success in the efforts of the international community to “discover” the good Taliban and strike a successful dialogue with them.

In terms of external security, Karzai refused to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with the United States, following which the latter had threatened to cut the aid and military support to Afghanistan. Even more importantly, relations with Pakistan had hit a low and were yet to recover when the elections took place.

And then, there has been another great question: are the Afghans ready for democracy? The April elections and the Afghan vote have to be interpreted in the above background. The Afghan nation seems to be on a positive road towards the transition. What are the challenges ahead? Will they be able to convert the positive elections into a successful transition and draft a new history?

I

AND THUS SPOKE THE AFGHANS...

Despite criticisms, this election is a definite success and watershed. If guided in the positive directions, this election could very well set the take off stage for multiple transitions within and outside Afghanistan. The widespread participation, including that of the youth and women signals a new democratic trend to be the stakeholder of governance process.

Second, this election depending on its eventual outcome of electing the next President would also signal an orderly transition of power, through democratic means by the people, established on legal and constitutional principles. The long term impact of the above is not well understood; some of us narrowly focussing this election as essentially a vote against the Taliban. Consider the following:

AN ORDERLY TRANSITION, ELECTED BY THE PEOPLE AND BASED ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL PRINCIPLES

This is what the April election all about, and not merely about electing a new President, or voting against the Taliban. Nothing sort of a revolution, given the history of Afghanistan in the last hundred years.

An answer to the following questions would reveal the long term impact of the April 2014 elections. Since the Great Game involving the British India and the Russian empire, when was the last time, there was an orderly succession and transfer of power from one ruler to another? When was the last time, a new ruler was elected in Afghanistan, without the last one being either ousted or imposed or killed? When was the last time, people took part directly in electing the next ruler in a credible, free and fair process? When was the last time, outside powers had such a limited influence in electing the new ruler?

Hamid Karzai, the current President of Afghanistan was not a natural choice of the Afghans. He was a part of the US led search for stability in Afghanistan, though there was a controversial election in 2009, which many agree was not too credible. The international community, especially the US threw the Taliban regime by force before making Karzai as the President. Before that, Mullah Omar ousted the then existing Mujahideen regime, with proactive support from Pakistan. Najibullah, Babrak Kamal, Nur Taraki, who ruled earlier were supported first and later ignored by the Soviet Union.

Perhaps Habibullah Khan (1872 -1919) was the last ruler of Afghanistan to have taken over the reign of Afghanistan without much of internal power struggle and external conspiracy, from his father Abdur Rahman Khan. Habibullah was assassinated in 1919, following which his brother Nasrullah ruled for few days, before being ousted by his brother Amanullah Khan. Though Amanullah ruled for the next ten years (1919-1929), he was ousted and had to escape from Afghanistan. Habibullah ruled Afghanistan after Amanullah's ouster for a short period in 1929, before ousted and executed by Nadir Khan with the British support during the same year. Nadir Khan ruled Afghanistan for the next four years, before he was assassinated in 1933.



Zahir Shah, the last King of Afghanistan took over in 1933, but was ousted in a coup in 1973 by Daud Khan. He ruled for the next five years, until the Saur revolution in 1978, which witnessed the killing of Daud and Nur Muhammad Taraki taking over as the President of Afghanistan. Both Taraki and his successor Hafizullah Amin (who ordered the former to death) ruled for a short period, before the Soviets entered Afghanistan in 1979. The Soviets played a crucial role in selecting successive leaders of Afghanistan – Babrak Kamal and Dr Najibullah. Though the Soviet troops left earlier, Najib could hold on to power until 1992. The Mujahideens led by Burhanuddin Rabbani ousted Najib, who in turn were thrown out by the Taliban in 1996. Dr Najibullah was brutally executed and hanged in public by the Taliban in 1996; and Rabbani, much later by a suicide bomb in 2011.

The above narrative, though brief and does not include the multiple conspiracies, internal divides and sub-plots, would highlight the troubled political road that Afghanistan had travelled during the last hundred years. And it is this complicated and painful progress, makes the April 2014 elections significant and a watershed – in terms of electing a new President, directly by the people, based on established legal and constitutional norms, and with less of conspiracies and external inputs.

INDEPENDENT ELECTION COMMISSION: A PROMISING START IN AFGHANISTAN

Second, the biggest credit should go to the Independent Election Commission (IEC) of Afghanistan, for organizing such an election.

Unlike the rest of South Asia, Afghanistan until recently, did not have an independent election commission, as a civilian institution, provided by the Constitution, supported by legal provisions and safeguarded by an independent judiciary. True, there were jirgas and Loya Jirgas earlier, but none of them could be compared to the Afghan IEC, that conducted elections.

Consider the magnitude. More than 7000 polling centers (though 750 of them were closed due to security reasons) would highlight the extent of geographic spread and the security threat in organising elections. According to one of the press releases, the IEC had to make use of vehicles, helicopters and even donkeys to transport the materials.

Given the lack of history and experience, the performance of the IEC is nothing short of a miracle. It shows the growing capacity within Afghanistan in organising independent elections, which is a good sign for the democratic transition.

CONGRATULATIONS KARZAI

Third, though the President has been under multiple criticisms on various issues from the domestic and international audiences, he would always be



remembered for organising this election. Despite threats from the Taliban, the entire election process has been relatively free and fair. Though he was criticised for the previous elections in 2009, many consider that he remained neutral and supported the IEC.

Had it not been for the executive decision and choice not to interfere, the IEC could not have remained independent and organised a free and fair elections. Karzai has to be complimented for this. Though one or the other candidate has been touted as his favourite during the initial phase of the electoral process, Karzai during the latter phase of the electoral process, especially before the actual election, seems to have kept equidistance from all the leading candidates.

Karzai seems to have made up his mind on the transition and perhaps want to make this election as his legacy to Afghanistan. That it would become—as his legacy, given the history of Afghanistan so far, and its future henceforth.

Congratulations Karzai.

ANSF: READY TO SUPPORT CIVILIAN INSTITUTIONS

Fourth, credit should also go to the Afghan security forces. For them, it should be the most crucial phase of transition. The international security forces are drawing down, handing over the responsibilities to the ANSF. For the military and police leadership, the immediate challenge would be to ensure adequate funding, training and required fire power to maintain the security situation. Unlike the other countries in South Asia, the ANSF are not well established; besides the internal political situation delicately erected over a divided ethnic fabric, there is a raging insurgency, supported proactively by Pakistan.

Supporting an election process amidst the above transition, mentally and organizationally would not have been easy task for the ANSF leadership. More importantly, the ANSF did not have sufficient experience in performing such an

assistance. Its contribution during the previous elections in 2009 was minimal, where the ISAF did most of the ground work.

April 2014 elections should be a benchmark for the ANSF as well in terms of assisting a civilian institution in support of a democratic process. Both in Afghanistan and elsewhere, the militaries traditionally had not been built to assist civilian institutions in terms of securing an election process. The IEC could not have succeeded in conducting the April 2014 election without the substantial support from the ANSF.

Given the primary mandate, security environment and the short span of the ANSF's background, what they did is substantial if not extraordinary.

THE AFGHAN CIVIL SOCIETY: LEADING A DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION TOWARDS A NEW AFGHANISTAN

Fifth, the credit should also go to the Afghans, cutting across the ethnic lines. It should not be easy for them to come out, vote and show faith in a democratic process, which they have not witnessed in their recent memory, except the controversial 2009 elections.

While the above institutions – Executive, IEC and the ANSF play their part well, it was the Afghan civil society which made all the difference. When they came to vote, there was nothing much to cheer about; the governance process was mired with inefficiency and corruption, and the security situation was volatile with threats and attacks from the Taliban. In terms of weather and climate, it was cold and raining.

But nothing would stop them. And what a statement they made. They may have still voted along the ethnic lines, but it does not matter. It was their election and they voted for a new Afghanistan. They came out in huge numbers; more than



60 percent of voters turned on the day of polling, waited in long queues to ink their fingers and make a statement.

In particular, the youth and women. According to eyewitnesses and reporters who were following the electoral process, there was a substantial section of women and youths voted on that day. Both have tremendous implications for the future of democratic process in Afghanistan. The long term impact of the participation of these two sections would be tremendous and augur well for the future of Afghanistan.

Finally, the political elite of Afghanistan, though have been accused of corruption and war lording, have also come a long way in deciding the outcome of this election. Consider the following: despite the fears of fraud, Karzai should be complimented for organizing these elections, relatively free and fair. Though there were accusations of Karzai favouring Zalmay Rassoul and allowing the government machinery to support the latter, the other two leading contenders do share an optimism of the whole process so far.

This is a good beginning. Towards a positive transition.

II END OF THE ROAD FOR TALIBAN?

Immediately after the successful elections, a series of reports in the international media projected the positive vote as end of the road for the Afghan Taliban and its influence. People did defy the Taliban and took part in the elections; the polling day witnessed less umber of violence and was largely peaceful.

But do the above mean, the Taliban is beginning to become irrelevant in the Afghan politics? Does the successful election also mean the declining military capabilities of the Taliban? Any early projection of the demise of Taliban and its influence based on one election would be counter productive to the process of transition.

True the process so far has been positive. True, people took part in large numbers, including women and the youths, defying the Taliban dictates. The election was far from being violent, as was predicted earlier.

However, the other side of the story is also equally true; the Election Commission had to close down nearly 700 polling stations due to security reasons. A section in southern and eastern parts of Afghanistan, where the Taliban remains strong, were afraid and did not come out to vote.

Instead of trying to find out whether Taliban has been defeated at this juncture, a relevant question would be: why the Taliban did not use violence and totally undermine the election process? The security situation in Afghanistan today is far from secure and the Taliban is nowhere closer to be considered as insignificant. It would be wrong to conclude that the Taliban was weak enough not to carry out targeted attacks, or general bomb blasts anywhere in Afghanistan during the elections. In fact, there were days in the recent past of Afghanistan, which were even more violent than what one had witnessed during the day of election last week.

Second, the ANSF is certainly much better trained and equipped when compared to the previous elections. They are also getting ready to take over the security situation completely, as the international security forces are drawing down. However, the security forces have not achieved a level of strength that would totally prevent the Taliban from going against.

Then why did the Taliban not target the election? Perhaps, this is a calibrated strategy by the Taliban. A section within Afghanistan and outside was not sure about the election outcome; they believed this one would also be as farcical and fraudulent as the previous one in 2009. With a deeply polarised society and strong ethnic differences between the major communities, many considered this election would be contentious and inconclusive, leading only to further political instability.

So the calculation within the Taliban and their supporters elsewhere could have been to wait and watch; if the election process results in political instability, it would only strengthen the case of the Taliban and undermine the democratic process and a transition funded and supported by the “West”. So why use violence and undermine a process that is already seen as faulty and unproductive? Perhaps, this was a strategy in keeping a low profile.

Second reason for Taliban’s relative restraint during the elections is to wait, watch and choose a time and place of their own. The Taliban is well aware that this is only the first round; if none of the candidates get the desired percentage of votes, there would be a second round amongst the top two. Taliban could very well target the process at that time; perhaps, this could be a wait and watch strategy by the Taliban, as it did immediately after the international security forces landed in Afghanistan in 2001-02. They disappeared into the mountains, only to engage in a guerrilla warfare, that too successfully. Perhaps, this time the Taliban wanted to gauge the response of the people, and pursue an appropriate course of action. The fact that the election process in the South and East were stunted does highlight that its base is intact.

To conclude, it is too early to write off the Taliban. Few high profile suicide attacks in Kabul and elsewhere would change the entire context and the discourse.

TALIBAN AFTER ELECTIONS: RENEWED ATTACKS OR POLITICAL DIALOGUE?

Where would the Taliban go in the post election period? Will it renew violence, as the counting process begins and Afghanistan gets ready for the second round of elections to choose the President amongst the two leading contenders? Or will it engage in a political dialogue with the High Peace Council, ultimately finding a role for itself in Afghanistan after the international security forces leave the country completely?

Despite the ANSF's success stories so far, the military equation between the State and the Taliban is not going to be the decisive factor. Taliban is well aware of its strengths; it is unlikely to wage an all out war in the near future; it would use guerilla tactics until it finds the internal political and governance situation is in its favour.

Political stability and social reconstruction by the Afghan government, an inclusive economic growth along with equitable distribution of development in urban and rural areas would become the decisive factor. Though corruption is also an issue, in the case of Afghanistan, the critics are exaggerating the case; this is a common issue for the entire South Asia and accusing Afghanistan alone may not provide the right answers. If the government is able to deliver and address the expectations of the Afghans, especially the new generation whose hopes have been kindled, the Taliban would not have a space to pivot against Kabul.

So the question where would the Taliban go – is not in the hands of Mullah Omar, but with the next President, and the rest of international community including Pakistan. If there is better governance, equitable development and inclusive growth, the Taliban will be relegated into an insignificant militant group that would eventually mutate into splinter groups, like the multiple Mujahideen groups did after the so called jihad against the Russians in the 1980s. If the international community lose interest in Afghanistan and allows the positive developments to go down the drain, along with ignoring any Pakistani ingress, it would only strengthen the hands of the Taliban. Worse, if the next government fail to deliver, support for the Taliban would only increase. Not by design, but by default.

The success and failure of the Taliban, is not in the hands of Mullah Omar. It rests with the next President and his ability to take Afghanistan forward.

III CHALLENGES AHEAD

Perhaps for Afghanistan, the real challenge starts from here. Until now, it has a well settled President and a significant presence of the international security forces. More than the presence of international troops, until now there has been a substantial interest in Afghanistan .

In the next few months, there would be a substantial change in all the above. Afghanistan would have a new President. International security forces would be on their way out of the country; despite the tall promises and commitments, international interest in Afghanistan is likely to decline, as their troops leave.

On the other hand, the insurgency led by the Taliban is no where closer to a closure. Nor are the supporters of the Taliban in Pakistan have a changed heart in improving the relations with Afghanistan, despite a tall rhetoric. More importantly, the successful election has thrown a big challenge for the next President – rising Afghan expectations, especially that of the youths and the women. Their widespread participation and enthusiastic vote mean, the next President has to deliver on the governance sector.

Challenges are substantial for the next President. Perhaps, therein lies an opportunity for him to prove a point.

CREDIBILITY OF ELECTORAL PROCESS AND POLITICAL ACCEPTABILITY

The first challenge post the April 2014 elections is to complete the process successfully in terms the next President assuming charge sooner and being acceptable by everyone, especially by those who have lost the elections.

As of now, based on the first round of counting, of the eight Presidential candidates, two of them are leading – Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani. The Chairman of the Independent Election Commission did mention that this is based on ten percent of the counting and there would be changes as the counting continues. The general understanding so far is - the principle contest would be between the above two candidates.

Will the election of one, be acceptable to the other? Ashraf Ghani is referred as an “ethnic Pashtun”, emphasising his background. He is also an Ahmedzai, one of the most notable sub-tribes of the Pashtun. Abdullah Abdullah has Pashtun-Tajik lineage from his father and mother’s sides respectively; however, owing to his closeness towards the Northern Alliance and Ahmed Shah Massoud, he is perceived more as a Tajik, than a Pashtun.

Will the divided Afghan polity accept either of these two, as their President? Though Afghanistan has always been deeply polarised on the ethnic lines, this question is an exaggeration today. Today, the youths in particular, who have taken part enthusiastically in the elections, though well aware of their immediate ethnic loyalty, perceive themselves more as an Afghan.

There is a slow, but steady “Afghan” identity emerging; this is visible in particular amongst the new generation. Emphasizing only of the ethnic fault



lines amongst the multiple Afghan communities and predicting a divided polity may not do justice to the transition within the Afghan society today. However, the new President cannot take this for granted and will have to walk a fine line in terms of appointment of top positions and dividing the limited financial resources towards all round development of Afghanistan.

ASHRAF OR ABDULLAH: WILL THEY BE ABLE TO GOVERN BETTER?

Second major challenge for the new President would be their own ability and available resources, especially human capacity, to govern Afghanistan. As mentioned earlier, the expectations are higher, while resources are limited.

International aid is likely to slow down; the primary challenge for the next President is to augment the existing resources, and explore new ones. In this context, the weak institutions, inhouse capacity in each of the ministries, available human resources within Afghanistan, and more importantly the existing level of cronyism and corruption cutting across all delivery mechanisms would be the biggest challenge for the new President.

Unlike the years of the Taliban, during the last decade, multiple positive steps and initiatives have been put in place; the Afghan population is better aware of what is happening within their country and in the rest of the region. Expectations have been substantially increased. Will the new President – whether Ashraf or Abdullah be able to meet the challenge of governance? Both are highly capable individuals and bring substantial experience with them. Both had worked in different ministries within Afghanistan; Ashraf Ghani served as the Finance Minister of Afghanistan, and had earlier worked with the World Bank. Abdullah Abdullah had been working closely with Ahmed Shah Massoud in the 1990s and have served as the foreign minister of Afghanistan, after the fall of Taliban.

Though Ashraf and Abdullah are highly qualified and experienced, the challenge would come not from their individual capacities, but from the quality of leadership in the rest of ministries and within each of the departments – at the national and provincial levels. Unlike rest of South Asia, the Afghan bureaucracy is relatively new; consider the level of transition required to adjust in the last four decades under the Soviet led communist model, the Taliban led irredentist structures, and now the international community led modern institutions. Even if the greed and corruption component of the bureaucracy has to be kept away, it would not be easier for any institution to cope up with such radical changes in every decade and yet deliver.

Besides the weak bureaucracy, the new President will also have to deal with working under a new Constitution and multiple legal structures. From tribal customs and practices, multiple jirgas at tribal to national levels, to the Supreme Court – Afghanistan have multiple legal structures. The challenge of institutions, human resources and capacity and the effectiveness of them are likely to pose a huge challenge to the next President.

TALIBAN AND PAKISTAN: WILL THEY STRIKE BACK?

Immediate challenge would come from the Taliban and its backers in Pakistan. Neither the Haqqanis nor Mullah Omar would have expected this result and certainly is not in their plan of action. What would they do now? As mentioned earlier, the Taliban and its structures are very much alive. It appears that the low level of violence on the day of elections was a deliberate decision to see the popular response. Now the people have spoken decisively in favour of popular governance and a democratic process, it is unlikely that the Taliban would sit quietly. Neither forms – popular governance or a democratic process, are in the interests of Taliban.

One is likely to see the Taliban increasing its presence and using extreme violence to put down any popular enthusiasm within Afghanistan. Any other strategy would only make them irrelevant.

More than Taliban's immediate response, Pakistan's long term reaction will remain the biggest challenge for the new President. Hamid Karzai's relationship with Pakistan was strained; though there were multiple meetings between the leaders of the two countries, the relationship remained hot and cold. While a section within the civil society in Pakistan seems to be in favour of a new approach towards Afghanistan, the GHQ will remain the primary mover of Pakistan's approach. Given the recent history across the Durand Line, developments do not provide any confidence that bilateral relations have changed any better.

Given the anti-Pakistan sentiments within Afghanistan, a democratic and independent ruler in Kabul is unlikely to act as an agent of Islamabad or Rawalpindi. This in turn would increase the distance between the two countries. If Kabul turns hostile, Islamabad and Rawalpindi have enough

leverage to undermine the success in Afghanistan. Though there is likely to be a blowback for Pakistan, if it pursues such as an approach and make the region even more violent and unstable, neither Islamabad nor Rawalpindi seems to have thought through pursuing such a strategy.

BEYOND THE BSA: ENSURING INTERNATIONAL AID AND COMMITMENT

The bigger challenge, for the new President however would be to ensure that the international community stays committed in Afghanistan. Irrespective of who becomes the next President, he is likely to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with the US. This would also ensure, that the American aid to Afghanistan continues, even if significantly reduced.

However, Afghanistan would need substantial economic aid and political support from the international community to complete the transition. In fact, that would be the biggest challenge for the next President. Unfortunately, there is a donor fatigue set in already; quick answers and solutions are not on the anvil, making it difficult for the international community to invest more. Problems of governance and siphoning off the aid have created a bad environment amongst the donors; they are not worried about the Taliban and violence, but extremely apprehensive of how the aid is distributed, and more importantly the nature and extent of its abuse.

The US and the rest of international community should take substantial satisfaction in what they have achieved so far. The Afghans have spoken in a single voice; let there be a exit strategy and a zero option in terms of military presence of the international security forces in Afghanistan; but such a zero option in military terms should be compensated with a hundred percent commitment and stay the economic and political course in Afghanistan.





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