

Afghan Peace Process Conundrum PART-I

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Afghan Poll Results: A Hurdle or Stepping Stone to Peace

Afghanistan from the past four decades has experienced a pull from all directions both internally and externally by a myriad of state and non-state actors, seeking to yield their respective interests. The country, which is about to wind up the longest war in its history, is at the brink of enormous uncertainty where the road to peace seems harder than war. Currently, confronted with the pressing and persistent impasse between three complex political issues: the elections, peace negotiations and security operations against the Taliban, the Afghan government is struggling to lead, own and control the intra-Afghan peace process. So far, the peace dialogues held by major powers including Russia, China, the US and even Pakistan have developed into undermining the involvement of the Afghan government through buck-passing. The active players in the region are seeking geostrategic opportunities and deterring threats by conducting peace talks amidst the New Great Game.

Further, with a suspected fraudulent election, the divide between the Afghan politicians has deteriorated and impeded the government from negotiating the peace process and preserving the constitutional rights of its citizens, thereby enabling greater leverage to the Taliban who control 70 per cent of Afghanistan. Afghans went to the voting booths on September 28, 2019, but experienced delay until November 14 in obtaining the preliminary presidential results, only to be delayed further due to technical reasons. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, re-elected after securing 50.64 per cent of the preliminary votes, has been alleged of deception by his main political rival, Dr Abdullah Abdullah, who secured 39.52 per cent of the vote despite experiencing the lowest turnout since the Taliban were overthrown in the year 2001. The decline of approximately a million votes (from 2.7 million to 1.8 million) through voter suppression has further renewed reservations over electoral fraud discrediting the legitimacy, liability and political stability of the Afghan government.

Effects of the Political Paralysis

As the international community witnesses a deadlock of war, peace and politics in Afghanistan, it is inevitable that the re-election of a supposed fraudulent Afghan government will have severe implications for its citizens if the intra-Afghan peace process is ineffectively negotiated. While the Asia Foundation survey in 2018 uncovered that “Afghans are slightly

more optimistic about the country going in the right direction,” from 32 per cent to 36 per cent, political turmoil limit the government in effectively exercising intra-Afghan peace process. The latest prisoner swap in November 2019 between the US and Afghan Taliban, also involving the Afghan government, a month before the revival of the peace process and its acceptance by all significant stakeholders demonstrates the current government’s instability. Despite Afghanistan’s initial rejection of the peace process and no incentive to undertake the swap, Ghani facilitated the negotiations due to his weak legitimacy, challenged by not only political adversaries but also by stakeholders who seek to make a deal with the Taliban. The prisoner-hostage exchange of an Australian and American academic for senior Haqqani members took place after intense dialogues between the Afghan government and the Taliban, with Pakistan’s assistance. The negotiations provide a little hope for the intra-Afghan peace process, which was previously challenging since the Taliban viewed the Afghan government as illegitimate. The Taliban further indicated the US and NATO troop withdrawal to serve as a prerequisite towards incorporating “a comprehensive ceasefire” and talking with Afghan delegates including government officials, demonstrating a progression towards intra-Afghan peace talks.

However, at this critical stage, Ghani’s weak and unclear mandate coupled with a low turnout and contested results make it problematic for his government to leverage in any discussions with the Taliban, making it an even more significant obstacle than the US-Taliban negotiations. That is not to say that the Ghani government which argues itself to be democratically elected would not contend the current progress towards a peace process. It can be anticipated that the recent elections might empower the Ghani government to turn the tables finally. The Afghan government which has been sidelined for many months from various peace dialogues might eventually find itself proclaiming an assertive stance on its role in the peace process. With a more Afghan-led, owned and controlled peace process promised by the US succeeding the US–Taliban peace agreement, it is unlikely that the Afghan government would want to deal with any more uncertainty. The government by undertaking a firmer stance might involve itself in the inter-Afghan peace process, urging the US government to prioritise a sophisticated political understanding over a military withdrawal, thereby guaranteeing the preservation of the social, political and humanitarian goals achieved since 2001. In other words, the Afghan’s assertive posture towards the peace process might reintegrate the intra-Afghan peace process into a broader peace agreement, which involves all significant players while holding them equally accountable.

At Crossroads: From Here to Where?

While the Afghan government is against any direct negotiations between Washington and the Taliban which concerns its sovereignty, it remains unseen how, after the US–Taliban peace talks concerning the pulling out of troops from Afghanistan and anti-terrorism assurances from the Taliban, it will affect the following intra-Afghan peace negotiations. If the Afghan government decides to adopt a wait-and-watch policy instead of demanding for an inclusive peace process, then the intra-Afghan peace negotiations would include the presence of the Afghan government in the discussions and a permanent country-wide ceasefire. If the peace negotiations proceed as anticipated by the government, which has often been regarded as the US’s ‘puppet’ regime by the Taliban, changes to the rights of women, free speech and the country’s constitution are viable. The talks would also determine the destiny of tens of thousands of Taliban militias fighting under Afghan warlords and the integration of the Taliban into mainstream Afghan society and politics.

However, thorny issues with current political instability and uncertainty could also fuel the likelihood of an unwanted civil war. The Taliban’s recapturing of Afghanistan could increase the manufacture of drugs, overspill of refugees along with undermining of notable achievements including civil liberties, women’s rights and children’s education posing national, regional and global challenges. So far, despite the marginalisation of women in Afghanistan, Afghan women have contributed on grassroots level country-wide by negotiating directly with the insurgents, releasing hostages (by initially contacting the wives of Talibs), facilitating dialogue, countering extremist’s narrative, gathering intelligence and creating public awareness of the peace process. In only 2 of 23 round table discussions concerning the Afghan government and the Taliban were women serving in any formal capacity. At the core of excluding women lie two frequently unstated but upheld notions: a) women are not efficient negotiators when it comes to the Taliban and b) women’s presence is not required as long as negotiators commit towards safeguarding women’s rights. However, women’s and civil society organisations’ participation is a prerequisite in ensuring the longevity of the peace agreement and lasting peace. If the political instability persists, and the peace process is not directed by local and international actors, enforcement mechanisms might then be too weak to uphold such democratic notions. In an attempt to promote these rights and liberties, the Afghan government should strongly voice its concerns and enforce an “Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled peace process” which does not leave ungoverned areas for exploitation by terrorists’ proxies. The government should also provide opportunities for women and civil liberty activists to participate in an inclusive peace process.

Further, discussions should address significant issues including the conclusion of the insurgency, reaching a political settlement and constructing credible institutions. Also, a legal and political system which upholds the institutional improvements made in the past several years should be formed. Finally, the emphasis on procedural arrangements for constitutional amendments and effective consultation with the Taliban are deemed vital for making any progress towards peace.

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