

Afghanistan's Changing Dynamics Under the Unity Government

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There are two diametrically opposite international perceptions about the impending situation in Afghanistan: one pessimistic and the other optimistic. The security environment, the resurgence of the Taliban, desertions in the Afghan National Army (ANA), increasing poppy cultivation, volatile political situation, rampant corruption and rise of fundamentalism all paint the picture of a troubled state.

Despite its numerous handicaps, the ANA is putting up stout resistance to the Taliban and other militant groups and thereby putting to rest rumours of divisions in the Army on ethnic lines. Civil society is becoming vibrant while many girls continue their studies in schools. A functional government is in place and most of the regional players are attempting to strengthen the state. All this offers hope for the future of Afghanistan.

Instead of depicting a pessimistic or optimistic picture, this paper takes a realistic approach to give a comprehensive account of Afghanistan's political, security and economic development since President Ashraf Ghani's government of national unity came to power.

Political Landscape

Since taking office in September 2014, Ghani has embarked upon some bold but controversial tasks. Knowing that Afghanistan's domestic matters are intertwined

with foreign relations, he has somehow synced both internal and foreign policies by mending Afghanistan's fractured relations with the major donors, including the United States (US).

On his first day in office, the President signed the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with the US, which had been held in abeyance for long by his predecessor Hamid Karzai because of growing disagreements with Washington on many issues, including American air strikes on Afghan villages.

Ghani's major challenge was sharing power with his political rival Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Dr. Abdullah under a unity government deal that was brokered by US Secretary of State John Kerry. There have been many disagreements between them. One of the main problems involved appointing Cabinet ministers, which took many months. A year on and at a time when the government is facing some of the worst Taliban attacks as well as the emergence of Daesh, the country is still without a full-time Defence Minister.¹

The process of appointing provincial Governors has been set in motion but the affairs of some provinces are still managed by acting officials², paving the way for insecurity, graft, alienation of the people and a more assertive insurgency.

Some of his decisions on the domestic front, however, have been master strokes like the appointment of four female Cabinet ministers, two women Governors and a female Supreme Court member despite protests from the conservatives.³ Though the female Supreme Court council nominee was rejected by the Parliament, the move evoked acclaim from many circles,⁴ with some women's rights activists insisting on another female nominee for the post.

Delivering on his promise, the President has also overhauled many state institutions by appointing talented, educated youths. A more courageous decision came when he and Abdullah agreed not to reappoint any official or minister from the previous government. Excluding many powerful figures of the Karzai era from the unity government perhaps paves the way for a future inquiry into their allegedly corrupt past.

Knowing that Pakistan held the key to Afghanistan's stability and had special influence over some Afghan Taliban leaders, Ghani travelled to Islamabad after visiting China and Saudi Arabia. This marked a major shift in Afghanistan's foreign policy, away from New Delhi and Tehran to Islamabad and Riyadh.

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He took a domestic gamble by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to win the neighbouring country's support for reconciliation with the Taliban.⁵ In short, Ghani has initiated some radical steps that not many would have dared to. His overtures toward Pakistan will take time to show results and prove that Afghanistan has done its part, though Pakistan has failed to stand by its word.

Given the unprecedented violence gripping Afghanistan and the emergence of groups like the self-styled Islamic State (IS) in some parts of the country, some are of the opinion that "Ghani went for a high five with Pakistan, but they are leaving him hanging,"⁶ while others suggested that it was necessary "to wait at least for another year to witness the fruit of policy shifts by Ghani."⁷ The policy change started coming to fruition when the government, Taliban and Haqqani network representatives met in Islamabad face to face,⁸ agreeing to meet after *Ramadan* to discuss a mechanism for ending the 14-year conflict.

The masses, however, are looking for immediate results given the fact that the Taliban's spring offensive this year has been the deadliest and the war has spread to relatively peaceful parts in the north, with casualties among the civilian and Afghan security forces hitting a new high.

Security Environment

The Taliban have been a prominent threat to Afghan security since 2001. A second threat is posed by the other terrorist groups that have been active in Afghanistan for the last two decades. These outfits include the Al Qaeda, East Turkmenistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Haqqani network and Islamic State in Syria (ISIS).

Regional and international players are using terrorist organisations as their proxies and economic instruments to assert their presence in Afghanistan for geo-political reasons. They represent another serious threat. The drug economy, playing an important role in perpetuating the insecure environment has emerged as a fourth major issue from the Afghan security perspective.

Insecurity in Afghanistan is the result of the amalgamation of these four layers. From 2004 to mid-2014, all these issues were handled by Karzai single-handedly, with the assistance of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the US. The political transition from Karzai to Ghani created two power centres, contributing to the ongoing wave of insecurity. The withdrawal

of the foreign combat forces had made the Afghan National Army (ANA) the first line of defence for the first time in 14 years.

Ghani has adhered to his predecessor's policy of reconciliation with the Taliban. In doing so, he is using all his political capital for the success of the process. His attempts appear to be an entirely Afghan-led process, although closely observed by the US and China. Similar initiatives by Karzai had not borne fruit.⁹

The Taliban, on the other hand, have been successfully carrying out their summer offensive this year. Attacks in Kunduz, Jalalabad and on the Parliament show the reach and sweep of the guerrillas, as well as the chinks in the Afghan security establishment.

The second layer of militancy involving the ETIM, IMU and Al Qaeda was relatively less intense in Afghanistan prior to Pakistan's military offensive, Zarb-e-Azb in North Waziristan. This operation has displaced Uzbek and Turkic fighters from their safe havens in Shawal and Datta Khel area and forced them to sneak into Afghanistan.¹⁰ Some of them have carried out brutal attacks in Badakhshan province, where they beheaded 20 Afghan soldiers.¹¹ Al Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent, which was launched in September 2014 when Aayman Al Zawahiri renewed loyalty to Mullah Omar,¹² may be using Afghanistan as a launch pad but has not carried out attacks within the country. However, the Haqqani network remains a force to be reckoned with in its strongholds of Paktia, Paktika, Khost and Kabul. It is responsible for the major attacks in these provinces.

In August 2014, Ahrar-ul-Hind, an offshoot of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), pledged allegiance to the ISIS.¹³ Since then, the ideological phenomenon has been mushrooming in the region. Soon after, many other disgruntled factions of the Taliban started supporting the ISIS.¹⁴ However, the coalition forces and ANA succeeded in eliminating the emerging leadership. For example, the leader of the Khurasan chapter, Mullah Khadim, was killed in February 2015.¹⁵

Later, in March, another leader Abdul Rahman—alias Osman—was killed in eastern Nangarhar province. Significant resistance from the Taliban could be another reason for stopping the march of the ISIS. Its extreme sectarian agenda makes the ISIS different from other groups, and the multi-ethnic Afghan society has been vulnerable to violent divisive ideas.

The proxy war between India and Pakistan for political influence, rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran for ideological influence, and the American interference for geo-political reasons all have been detrimental to the interests

of the Afghan state. Ghani has been dealing with this situation with his five circles of foreign policy¹⁶ and is trying to maintain a balance.

Afghan national security is interlinked with the situation in Pakistan, hence, Ghani has reached out to the neighbour without carrying over the legacy of anti-Pakistani sensitivities. But the fruits of this ‘courageous’ move are yet to be seen. On the other hand, he is reaching out to crucial regional players through the Istanbul process to undercut support for the militants. The talks with the Taliban and the signing of the BSA with the US show the positivity of his efforts.

A major chunk of Taliban funding comes from within Afghanistan, which has the largest raw opium cultivation area in the world. Income from the illicit crop is used to fund the Taliban’s operational activities. Counter-narcotics measures were successful during the period 2008 to 2010, but since then, the growth in cultivation has increased every year, reaching approximately 224,000 hectares in November 2014, compared with 123,000 hectares in 2010.¹⁷

To tackle this problem, the Afghan government has launched a host of initiatives, the most recent being the “Afghanistan Drug Reporting System” which was unveiled in June 2015.¹⁸ The deteriorating security situation and the failure to promote governance in rural areas have forced farmers to resort to poppy cultivation. It has become part of the conflict economy in Afghanistan, with many actors benefitting from it. Ghani summed up the issue by saying, “There are the producers, processors, traffickers and consumers, this forms a chain”.¹⁹ Around 5.2 percent of the Afghan population has been addicted to heroin while southern Afghanistan—a stronghold of the Taliban—produces 67 percent of the country’s total opium. The insurgency in Afghanistan, is thus, closely interlinked with the narcotics money.

Economic Situation

Determined to eradicate the cancer of graft from the country, Ghani immediately issued a decree, seeking the reopening of the Kabul Bank case to retribute over \$900 million lost in fraudulent property deals, massive off-book loans and credit to fake corporations²⁰. This was the biggest banking scandal in the history of Afghanistan.

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After their imprisonment, the main accused, former heads of the bank, key shareholders and political figures, pledged to repay their dues in installments. In July 2015, other defaulters were barred from travelling out of the country and their assets frozen for not meeting the three-month deadlines for returning the dues²¹. According to Ghani, Kabul Bank's scandal has hurt Afghanistan's banking system and will always remain a dark spot in the once flourishing sector.

Via another decree, he ordered the creation of a National Procurement Committee (NPC) whose meetings he chairs regularly. The NPC thoroughly evaluates all government contracts before approving or rejecting them. Recently, Ghani announced that the NPC had saved Afghanis 5 billion in evaluating more than 300 contracts of several ministries.²²

A major chunk of embezzlement has ostensibly taken place in the Ministry of Defence (MoD) oil contracts. Ghani scrapped the ministry's contracts, suspended its procurement officials, banned them from travelling abroad and ordered thorough investigations. A committee, tasked with probing the matter, revealed in its findings that the oil for the MoD cost \$100 million more than the original market price.

Naser Timory, a researcher at Integrity Watch Afghanistan, who has been closely watching the anti-corruption efforts, is of the opinion that the government has both the political will to deal with, and an understanding of, the menace plaguing the impoverished country. According to Timory, the President has started to tackle the root of the problem instead of prosecuting some low-level officials. But the country is already up against many challenges ranging from economic to political mafias, and from land grabbers to powerful private security companies that have been dissolved.²³

Conclusion

Although the unity government inherited a framework and a system that was non-existent back in 2001, it is still mired in corruption, nepotism and, worst of all, at the end, with empty coffers. Fixing a country that has been among the three most corrupt nations of the world will remain a challenge even for the author of "Fixing Failed States" and to expect overnight miracles can only be an ambitious dream.

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Notes

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