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Afghanistan in Transition: Will 'Bonn II' be a Game Changer?

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Abstract

All hopes and attention are yet again riveted on another international conference in Bonn, Germany, later this year. Taking place, almost a decade after the last conference in Bonn, the forthcoming conference (Bonn II)² is seen as a window of opportunity for the Afghans and the international community to address the past shortcomings and set the parameters for the long term stabilisation of the country beginning with the effective transition (Inteqal) from international to Afghan hands by 2014.

Road from 'Bonn I': Politics of Exclusion & Regional Power Politics

The first Bonn conference or 'Bonn I' on 5 December 2001 laid the foundations of the present political system in Afghanistan. To address the chaos and uncertainty prevailing in Afghanistan following the dislodging of the Taliban from Kabul necessitated and even

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² The labelling of upcoming conference in Bonn as 'Bonn II' has varied interpretations. While many from the international community argue that this is not a successor conference to the first Bonn conference, 'Bonn I', falling on its 10th anniversary, Afghans view this as a major event that would bring in much needed changes in the present political system, as it also chalks out a strategy of sustaining international support beyond 2014. The international community, particularly the Europeans, have warned against raising such expectations and are trying to narrowly restrict the agenda to a stocktaking exercise of transition that needs to be completed by 2014. The author's interactions and discussion with members of parliament, government officials, academia, media, women's groups, civil society and non-governmental organisations during field visits to Afghanistan in May and June 2011. Also see Wazhma Frogh, 'Bonn II Paper Series One: Who is setting the agenda for another international Conference on Afghanistan in Bonn?' *Tolo News* (5 August 2011), <http://tolonews.com/en/wazhma-frogh/3579-bonn-ii-paper-series-one-who-is-setting-the-agenda-for-another-international-conference-on-afghanistan-in-bonn>. Accessed on 7 August 2011. Dr Hussain Yasa, '2nd Bonn Conference- A Probable Last Chance to Rescue Afghanistan', *Daily Outlook Afghanistan* (24 August 2011), http://outlookafghanistan.net/topics.php?post_id=1649. Accessed on 1 September 2011.

justified a need for a powerful centralised executive form of government.³ ‘Bonn I’, aimed at unifying, albeit superficially, a diverse war-ravaged society fragmented by ethno-tribal, religious and ideological cleavages, which have been repeatedly exploited by neighbouring countries.

In the hope of maintaining a unitary state, the international community installed the present political framework envisaging the reinstatement of the 1964 Constitution minus the restoration of monarchy⁴ and put in-charge a western educated moderate Pushtun as the head of the interim government as bulwark against the centrifugal forces breaking the country apart. In his speech to the closing session of the Loya Jirga (Grand Council) in 2004, President Hamid Karzai justified the basis of the new constitution – ‘which mandated a presidential system with a bicameral parliament, a highly centralised administration with unprecedented rights for minority languages, and an Islamic legal system safeguarded by a Supreme Court with powers of judicial review – would meet the needs of a desperately indigent but proud country searching for a period of stability in which to rebuild’.⁵

Over the past decade, the centralised executive form of political system has been constantly challenged and discredited by the country’s fraudulent 2009 presidential election and 2010 parliamentary elections, the constant bickering between the President and Parliament,⁶ deteriorating security, poor governance and near absence of rule of law, thus, sparking a vibrant debate inside and outside Afghanistan for a need of course correction. The magnitude of the problem and simmering discontent is such that long time Afghan observers warn: ‘If in 2001 the West was afraid that the absence of a strong centralised government in Kabul would prompt Afghanistan’s dissolution, by 2011 the West has come to fear that a dysfunctional centralised government could cause this same outcome’.⁷

‘Bonn I’ was successful in stitching together an impressive coalition of major regional powers (including Iran)⁸ and leaders across ethnic lines. But it made a conscious decision to keep the Taliban out, sidelining even those who had surrendered and were ready for

³ ‘Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions’, <http://www.afhangovernment.com/AfghanAgreementBonn.htm>. Accessed on 1 July 2011.

⁴ The Bonn agreement, concluded on 22 December 2001 by major Afghan factions through an UN-brokered conference in Bonn, envisaged the reinstatement of the 1964 Constitution minus the restoration of monarchy. ‘Interim government restores 1964 Afghan Constitution’, *Afghanistan News Centre* (5 February 2002), <http://www.afghanistannewscenter.com/news/2002/february/feb5p2002.html>. Accessed on 10 September 2011.

⁵ Rubin, Barnett R., ‘Crafting a Constitution for Afghanistan’, *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 15, Number 3, July 2004, pp. 5-19.

⁶ Kenneth Katzman, Afghanistan: Politics, Elections, and Government Performance, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report, RS21922 (13 July 2011), <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RS21922.pdf>. Accessed on 23 July 2011.

⁷ Thomas Barfield, ‘Afghanistan’s Ethnic Puzzle: Decentralizing Power before the U.S. Withdrawal’, *Foreign Affairs* (September/ October 2011).

⁸ Shanthie Mariet D’Souza, ISAS Insights, No.132: ‘Iran, US and the Afghan Conundrum’ (1 September 2011), http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/Attachments/PublisherAttachment/ISAS_Insights_132_-_Email_-_Iran,_US_and_the_Afghan_Conundrum_06092011162910.pdf. Accessed on 5 September 2011.

negotiations, defining them as the defeated power. It was seen as a victor's peace attended by Washington's Afghan allies, who carved up the post-war status quo between them⁹, almost amounting to dividing the post-war spoils. Moreover, in spite of the hopes it generated for Afghanistan, one of the major shortcomings of 'Bonn I' was the failure to elicit a strong regional commitment from neighbouring countries to curb their interference in Afghanistan. This resulted in a continuing practice by the Afghan's neighbours, notably Pakistan to provide sanctuaries, support and training to their proxies to carry out destabilising activities inside the war-torn country.

Setting the Agenda for 'Bonn II': Need for Course Correction?

These deficiencies of 'Bonn I' make 'Bonn II' perhaps the last and yet, the best chance for the international community to effect a course correction in Afghanistan as the drawdown of international forces continue. The three issues that will be debated upon – the civil aspects of the process of transferring responsibility to the Government of Afghanistan by 2014; the long-term involvement of the international community in Afghanistan after 2014; and the political process that should lead to a long-term stabilisation of the country¹⁰ – are critical in chalking out future trajectory for a stable Afghanistan.

The conference, which will convene about 1,000 delegates from 90 nations in Bonn, will debate these issues in the hope of actualising the goal of transition (*Inteqal*) by 2014. While there is a cautious optimism among the Afghans, the European diplomats have warned against drawing any conclusions from the coincidence of it falling on the 10th anniversary of 'Bonn I' or even raising expectations, 'This would not be Bonn 2.0... it would instead just be a stocktaking on the road to 2014 and the transition to Afghan-run security and NATO withdrawal'.¹¹ But events on the ground and the raised level of expectations among the Afghans indicate a disconnect between the hopes and aspirations of the Afghans and international community on the prospects for long-term stabilisation of Afghanistan. Many Afghans perceive the conference as a venue to hurriedly transfer authority to complete the transition process by 2014, not taking cognizance of the fragile conditions on the ground.

⁹ Julian Borger, 'Bonn conference could mark formal start of Afghan peace process', *The Guardian* (20 June 2011), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/julian-borger-global-security-blog/2011/jun/20/afghanistan-taliban-talks-bonn>. Accessed on 10 September 2011.

¹⁰ 'The International Afghanistan Conference in Bonn to set the course for Afghanistan's future', *Auswaertiges-amt* (5 May 2011), http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/EN/Aussenpolitik/RegionaleSchwerpunkte/AfghanistanZentralasien/Bonn_Konferenz_2011/Bonn-Konferenz-Einstieg-node.html. Accessed on 10 September 2011.

¹¹ Julian Borger, 'Bonn conference could mark formal start of Afghan peace process', *The Guardian* (20 June 2011), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/julian-borger-global-security-blog/2011/jun/20/afghanistan-taliban-talks-bonn>. Accessed on 10 September 2011.

While the West would like to be cautious, there is an element of skepticism in Afghanistan and outside as well. It is pointed out that another international conference alone would not be a ‘game changer’ in Afghanistan, especially when the participants would be handpicked delegates of Karzai, providing the opposition and civil society groups only token representation. Such fears have been confounded since Karzai has opted for a traditional Loya Jirga instead of a constitutional Loya Jirga that would ensure pre-eminence of his supporters in the conference and therefore, a continuation of the present political system. The recent announcement by Karzai that he would not run for Presidency again beyond the present term¹² has not helped ease concerns of the President using extra constitutional measure or even amending the constitution to stay in power beyond his second term. Karzai's announcement has thus been interpreted as a tactic to defuse pressures and expectations from him at a time of political impasse, transition and weakening support base in the southern part of the country.

The Present ‘Political Stalemate’: Gathering Storm?

The relations between the highly centralised presidential system and the Parliament have been rocky impeding the functioning of the government for almost a year. On 21 August, Afghanistan's election commission ordered the unseating of nine of the parliament's 249 lawmakers for electoral fraud. The decision was meant to defuse a feud between Karzai and the Parliament stretching back to the September 2010's fraud-riddled legislative elections.¹³ Karzai had tried using a special elections court, filled with judges appointed by him, to unseat 62 parliament members, but was prevented from doing so as a result of international pressure.¹⁴ The victory of the opposition camp in this episode notwithstanding, there is an overwhelming consensus that the highly centralised form of government that ‘Bonn I’ facilitated is responsible for the state of affairs today – a ‘predatory state’ more known for its indulgence in rampant corruption, inefficiency, patronage and cronyism rather than a form of democracy the Afghans had euphorically welcomed and hoped would transform their lives, state and society.

Discussions with the Afghans this summer clearly illustrates their disillusionment and frustration with the present form of government and are talking of the need for greater

¹² Ben Arnoldy, ‘Afghanistan's future murkier as Karzai disavows third term’, *The Christian Science Monitor* (12 August 2011), <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2011/0812/Afghanistan-s-future-murkier-as-Karzai-disavows-third-term>. Accessed on 13 August 2011.

¹³ Dion Nissenbaum, ‘Afghan Election Panel Seeks to Expel Nine Legislators on Electoral Fraud’, *The Wall Street Journal* (22 August 2011), <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111903327904576522612987886134.html>. Accessed on 23 August 2011.

¹⁴ Kenneth Katzman, Afghanistan: Politics, Elections, and Government Performance, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report, RS21922 (13 July 2011), <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RS21922.pdf>. Accessed on 23 July 2011.

decentralisation of power including federalism. They feel that the international community has failed to understand the nature of the Afghan state in its historical and traditional sense and has imposed an alien system in the name of democracy.

This does not amount to an outright rejection of democracy but a yearning for a form of government in sync with local needs and aspirations which include greater decentralisation, federal polity, political party system, room for opposition, electoral processes, accountability, transparency, rule of law and efforts towards consensus building on issues of critical importance.¹⁵ The recent political impasse and demonstrations in Kabul indicate some sort of opposition activity but Afghanistan needs better opportunities to stir up a vibrant and inclusive political system. The Northern groups have had, since ‘Bonn I’, indeed for decades prior to Bonn, a desire for a more federal state with a Prime Minister and a weaker President or probably the King.

The strong centralised Presidential system has been constantly challenged not only internally but also by the continuing Taliban violence, even as the drawdown of American forces has commenced. The systematic targeting and elimination of power brokers, government officials and police chiefs is increasingly isolating Karzai from his own support base among the Pushtuns in the southern part of the country, thereby adding new complexities.¹⁶ Even after a decade-long international military effort and raising of a large Army, the Taliban remains a potent force, leading to a conclusion that the military defeat of the extremists is a near impossibility. On the other hand, the insurgents have been able to effectively use the deficiencies of the present political system, lack of governance, ineffective administration, corruption and ills of the present government to their advantage.

Moreover, the Afghan population has shown that Afghans are true to their historic tendency to resist attempts by Kabul at over-centralisation of authority. A ‘fence sitting’ mentality pervades as they tend to identify themselves with those perceived to be winning. At the moment, neither the government nor the Taliban are seen to be winning, though in the south the Taliban violence will have a demonstrative effect.

In Search of a ‘Political Solution’: Talks, Reconciliation, Power Sharing with the Taliban?

In the face of the rising onslaught of the Taliban insurgency, the Afghan government and the international community have arrived to a conclusion on the need for a political solution to

¹⁵ Author’s interactions and discussions with government officials, academia, media personnel, non-governmental organisations, civil society and women groups during field visits to Afghanistan in May and June 2011 and Dushanbe in July, 2011.

¹⁶ Shanthie Mariet D’Souza, ‘Afghanistan’s killing fields: Will it lead to crisis of confidence for the “transition”?’ *Al Arabiya* (19 July 2011), <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/07/19/158250.html>. Accessed on 11 September 2011.

end the war. Despite such public pronouncements and establishment of a High Peace Council (HPC), the reconciliation process with the Taliban is another area where the Afghan government has made little effort of evolving a national consensus. The HPC, which has been established by the Afghan government, has provided the official address for the reconciliation process. It sends a right signal that all process of reconciliation should occur with Afghans in the lead and working in a participatory, transparent and inclusive manner. However, the workings of the HPC suggest that it has ended up as a talk shop of handpicked delegates. Worse still, to most Afghans, HPC is a money-generating scheme¹⁷ rather than a genuine process of reconciliation. It fails to reflect the genuine concerns of civil society groups.¹⁸

As the preparations for ‘Bonn II’ are underway, there is also a realignment of forces that could pose a significant opposition to the reconciliation process at the Conference and otherwise. While there has been outright rejection of reconciliation with the Taliban by most northern groups, their emphasis has been on intra-Afghan reconciliation. They have been increasingly questioning the very nature of Pushtun dominated polity in the country. In addition they have been critical of Karzai, unsure of the reconciliation process and frequently raised the issue of sanctuary the Taliban has received in Pakistan. Ahead of the Bonn conference, there have been several meetings among the opposition forces including former Vice President Ahmad Zia Masoud, Haji Muhaqiq, Abdullah Abdullah, General Abdul Rashid Dostum, Amrullah Saleh, Ismail Khan, Ata Muhammad Noor and others in Kabul and Mazar in a bid to put up a united front. There is no formal unanimity yet, but a ‘grand alliance’ is said to be in the making¹⁹, not only to oppose the present political dispensation but also to provide an alternate voice at Bonn.

One option of co-opting the Taliban that is being advocated is ‘opening up provincial and district governorships to competition’ that would provide the safest form of power sharing with the Taliban. Allowing the Taliban to serve in a democratic government would likely lead to beneficial fissures within the Taliban, since those who come to hold positions in local government would have less reason to remain loyal to the Taliban leadership based in Pakistan. The stated goal of the Taliban’s central command – seizing power nationwide – would immediately clash with the interests of these local commanders turned politicians. This would drive a wedge between the ideologically hardened leaders and the local commanders, thus depriving the leadership of the support base’.²⁰

¹⁷ Dr Hussain Yasa, ‘2nd Bonn Conference- A Probable Last Chance to Rescue Afghanistan’, *Daily Outlook Afghanistan* (24 August 2011), http://outlookafghanistan.net/topics.php?post_id=1649. Accessed on 1 September 2011.

¹⁸ Patricia Gossman, *Afghan High Peace Council Fails to Reflect Afghan Civil Society*, Peace Brief, No.74, United States Institute of Peace (USIP), Washington DC, (10 January 2011), http://www.usip.org/files/resources/PB74-Afghan_High_Peace_Council_Fails_to_Reflect_Afghan_Civil_Society.pdf. Accessed on 1 September 2011.

¹⁹ Hussain Yasa ‘The Dark Clouds’, *Daily Outlook Afghanistan* (9 June 2011), http://outlookafghanistan.net/topics.php?post_id=845. Accessed on 11 September 2011.

²⁰ Whereas non-Pashtun Afghans oppose granting the Taliban a role in the national government, they have few objections to former (or even current) Taliban members serving in districts or provinces where they have

There have been conflicting views on the United States (US) and NATO intent to use 'Bonn II' as a platform for a political settlement by including the Taliban in the conference. While the previous attempts and process of reconciliation have remained problematic as the contours of the political settlement are not clearly laid out, there are reports on direct talks with insurgents and contacts established between the US and some Taliban representatives from the Quetta Shura (QST). Pakistan has been shoring up support for inclusion of the Haqqani Network. Yet the US Ambassador to Kabul has categorically stated that the Taliban are not to be included in 'Bonn II'.²¹

The Taliban has used every opportunity to publicly reject the idea of peace negotiations, saying all foreign forces must leave Afghanistan before any such talks begin. However, what generates hope among the parties hoping for the success of the reconciliation, is the odd statements by its top leadership, which can be loosely interpreted as acceding to a process of peaceful dialogue. August provided one such occasion. Taliban chief Mullah Omar admitted for the first time that some contacts have already taken place. In a 28 August message for the Eid al-Fitr holiday, he said 'every legitimate option can be considered' in order to reach the Taliban's goal of establishing 'an independent Islamic regime' in Afghanistan. He added, however, that 'the contacts which have been made with some parties for the release of prisoners can't be called a comprehensive negotiation for the solution of the current imbroglio of the country.'²² Quite naturally, this statement, which promised to establish a 'peace-loving and responsible regime' encompassing all Afghan ethnicities elicited cautious optimism among some US and Afghan officials.

Such uncoordinated attempts of reconciliation and dialogue would result in dissipated efforts and further suspicion inside and outside Afghanistan. Likewise the yet to be inked US-Afghan strategic partnership that envisions US troop presence beyond 2014 as a 'security guarantee' for the Afghans is creating considerable disquiet inside and outside Afghanistan. Fears of a permanent American presence have been articulated by neighbouring countries like Iran, Pakistan, Russia and China. While Iran and Pakistan are seen to be moving closer, China is watching developments with some concern which could lead to regional reconfiguration of forces.

local support. Thomas Barfield, 'Afghanistan's Ethnic Puzzle: Decentralising Power Before the U.S. Withdrawal', *Foreign Affairs* (September/ October 2011).

²¹ 'No Space for Taliban in Bonn Conference: Crocker', *Tolo News*, (04 August 2011), <http://www.afghanistannewscenter.com/news/2011/august/aug42011.html#1>. Accessed on 30 August 2011.

²² Yaroslav Trofimov And Maria Abi-Habib, 'Taliban Need 'Pain' to Talk, Envoy Says', *Wall Street Journal* (9 September 2011), <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111904103404576558431089318822.html>. Accessed on 1 September 2011.

Is There a Way Out of the Present Quagmire?

Amid such internal and external uncertainties surrounding the discourse on the future of Afghanistan, it is highly doubtful as to how much a single conference can provide in terms of solutions to the country's problems, especially when it does not provide a platform to all important stakeholders. Another international conference is scheduled to be held in Istanbul in November to shape the agenda and points of discussion and agreement between Afghan government and international community. However, it will be prudent to set the agenda now, rather than depend on the collective as well as fiercely competitive wisdom of an international conference with competing agendas, narrow goals and lack of clear coordinated strategy.

Though there are no magic bullets to solve all of Afghanistan's problems, a good beginning could be made by initiating serious dialogue on political, security, constitutional and governance reforms. As expressed by the Afghans, decentralisation of power and a federal form of government could be an alternative to the present system. Decentralisation might result in a weaker central government, but that does not necessarily lead to a weaker nation. A federal parliamentary system where territorial administrative regions are restructured as autonomous units could pave way for the surrendered reintegrated insurgents to contest elections and come to power peacefully in the areas they have popular support. The present system has no mechanism for such coexistence.²³ Along with structural changes such as political devolution and the allowance of political parties, the opening up of the political field in advance of 2014 offers the best possibility of creating a more stable and legitimate Afghan government. If Washington leaves the question of executive power unaddressed until 2014, then the much-heralded transition of responsibility to the Afghan government may flounder over disputes about the government's legitimacy.²⁴

The international community has been provided yet another opportune moment. It needs to seize the opportunity by ensuring that all factions of Afghan society, including all political groups, civil society, women groups, non-governmental organisations and, media are included in a truly representative and participatory nation-building process. If 'Bonn II' is to be a platform of developing a functional political system, the agenda and participation have to be broad-based and representative. There is also a need to arrive at a regional peace agreement and establish mechanisms of guarantees in restoring Afghanistan's neutrality to curb neighbour's interference.

²³ Dr Hussain Yasa, '2nd Bonn Conference - A Probable Last Chance to Rescue Afghanistan', *Daily Outlook Afghanistan* (24 August 2011), http://outlookafghanistan.net/topics.php?post_id=1649. Accessed on 1 September 2011.

²⁴ Thomas Barfield, 'Afghanistan's Ethnic Puzzle: Decentralizing Power Before the U.S. Withdrawal', *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 2011).

‘Bonn II’ will have to adopt a multi-pronged, participatory and inclusive approach of getting all the parties on board, if this conference has to be a ‘game changer’. The international community cannot afford to miss out on another such window of opportunity by taking a ringside view of events that could shape the future of Afghanistan and the region for times to come.

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