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Afghanistan Presidential Election 2009: Developments since the Fall of the Taliban

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Abstract

This is the first of three briefs to be published by the Institute of South Asian Studies to put the forthcoming Afghanistan election in the context of developments in the country since the fall of the Taliban in December 2001.

We can see three phases through which the country has passed in the last eight years. The first lasted for three years, from 2001 to 2004, when the country held its first presidential election. This was the period of considerable hope; the economy had picked up, the country adopted a new Constitution and an elected president took office. In the second phase from 2004 to 2008, some of the old problems resurfaced. Kabul began to lose its grip on the country as local warlords and drug lords reasserted their authority in the vast countryside which became increasingly ungovernable. The Taliban began to regroup in the southern provinces bordering on Pakistan. The opposition to President Hamid Karzai became vocal and stories about corruption involving the president's associates and members of his family began to circulate. The third phase started in late 2008. The international community, having become concerned with these developments, intensified its effort to stop the increasing influence of the Taliban. In January 2009, with Barack Obama having assumed the presidency in the United States, Washington undertook a review of its policy towards the country that included the incorporation of Pakistan as a part of the Afghan problem. The new approach was called the AfPak strategy and a special presidential envoy was appointed to coordinate the response of the United States and its allies towards Afghanistan.

This series of briefs will use these developments as the background against which to analyse the lead up to the second presidential election scheduled for 20 August 2009, the election itself and what could be expected as a result of the election.

Introduction

On 20 August 2009, Afghanistan will hold its second presidential election. The first, held in 2004, brought back Hamid Karzai to the presidency. This time, he occupied that position due

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to the will of the people rather than the discretion of the international community, led by the United States. His electoral victory marked an extraordinary moment in the history of the country. The country seemed to be moving towards a situation where it could run its own affairs on the basis of a written Constitution that required the president to face elections every five years.

The economy had begun to recover from decades of drift. The gross domestic product had registered double digit rates of growth. The large Afghan diasporas had begun to invest in the country and its members were providing both the government and the private sector with the skills a developing economy needed. Just one set of numbers would illustrate the amount of progress that was made. As Ashraf Ghani, the former World Bank official who served as Finance Minister from 2002 and 2005 and is a candidate for the election of 20 August 2009, wrote in an article contributed to the *Financial Times*, “The number of mobile telephones jumped from 100 in July 2002 to more than one million at the end of 2005, and private investment in mobile phones exceeded US\$200 million”.²

There was also progress on the security front. The humbled Taliban seemed to be lying low; some of them had begun to signal their willingness to enter mainstream Afghan politics and economy. The West, heavily involved in the policing of the country and its economic development, was pleased with the results. George W. Bush, then-President of the United States, stood vindicated in his strong belief that even very backward societies – Afghanistan was certainly one of those – could choose democracy as the right mode for governance. While his nation-building experiment did not seem to be working in Iraq, it appeared to be making some progress in Afghanistan.

Worsening of the Situation

However, the situation started to change for the worse, first slowly, then very rapidly. Karzai’s first term as the elected president did not produce the expected results. The economy began to slide as the cultivation of poppies and the processing and trading of drugs became the most important part of the economy. The discredited Taliban resurfaced, their ranks strengthened by the Pushtuns from the South who felt that the evolving Afghan system was discriminating against them. The anti-state forces, having watched and learnt new tactics from the operators in Iraq, began to gain traction, particularly in the areas bordering Pakistan. Their operations confirmed what terrorism experts had feared all along – the use of modern communications to form links between different groups whose principal aim was to hurt the working of the state.

This was the situation in Afghanistan when Obama took office as the United States president in January 2009. During the presidential campaign, he had repeatedly said that it was Afghanistan and not Iraq that needed the United States’ attention. Now he was in a position to turn that pledge into public policy.

President Barack Obama’s Approach

To bring about change in America’s approach to the Afghan problem, President Obama ordered a review of what had been done in the past, the impact of the approach the United States and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) partners had adopted during the

² Ashraf Ghani, “How Afghans can build a better future”, *Financial Times*, 13 August, 2009, p. 7.

Bush administration, and what changes were needed in Washington's strategy. The review focused on three major changes that needed to be made. These were announced by President Obama at the summit of the NATO leaders in April 2009. By that time he had already taken one of the three steps. Washington was to treat Afghanistan and Pakistan as parts of the same problem. The problem was given a name – the AfPak issue – and Richard Holbrooke was appointed as the President's special representative for AfPak. Initially, India was implicitly included in the Holbrooke mandate but New Delhi was disturbed by the move, fearing that that would introduce the United States as a player in dispute resolution in South Asia. This has always been resisted by the Indians.

The second major move was to give the countries in the area the sense that the American involvement would be time-bound. The responsibility for fighting terrorism in their countries had to be shouldered by Afghanistan and Pakistan. The United States was prepared to help. In Afghanistan, the focus of American attention was to be on reducing the influence of drugs on the economy and on training and equipping the Afghan National Army (ANA) to assume the responsibility for ensuring security in the country. While the drug policy is still being developed, some progress has been made in making the ANA a viable force. The aim is to expand the ANA from a force of 88,000 to 134,000 over a three-year period. According to one observer, since the push began last year, the Afghan army ranks "have swollen steadily and the desertion rate has fallen from a high of 40 percent in past years to less than 20 percent now. This is partly the result of a large boost in soldiers' pay to US\$120 per month – an officer's salaries start at US\$210 – and partly the result of the ANA's growing national prestige."³

The third plank of the new approach was to systematically address the problem of governance and widespread corruption. This is a difficult area in which rapid progress can be made. This is especially the case in a country such as Afghanistan in which the instruments of the state were destroyed by the struggle that has gone on for 30 years. The work done by economists such as Paul Collier suggests that the best way to reconstruct a state that has had extended periods of conflict is to provide incentives to those who were on the other side of the conflict to switch sides.⁴ In the Afghan case, this would mean approaching those elements within the Taliban movement who are not determined to destroy the state.

Conclusion

The important conclusion to draw from this brief analysis is that much rides on how the forthcoming election is held and what results it produces. There is considerable nervousness among those who are closely watching the days leading up to the election. They have many fears, among which is the possibility that one of the many candidates contesting the election could be assassinated. If that were to happen, it is the requirement of the Constitution that the election must be postponed. This would serve the purpose of the anti-state groups since they are afraid that a successful election would confer legitimacy on the victor, making it difficult for them to win the hearts and minds of the population. The dissidents seem bent upon creating trouble before the people go to the polls. The purpose is to scare them enough to have them stay at home on the day of the election. This would lower the turnout rate and thus reduce the legitimacy of the election. A bold attack on the heart of Kabul close to the

³ Pamela Constable, "Afghan scramble to lead fight", *Financial Times*, 3 August 2009.

⁴ Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why the poorest countries are failing and what can be done about it*, London, Oxford University Press, 2007.

American Embassy on 15 August 2009 took several lives. It was obviously meant to send a message to the citizenry.

Zalmay Kahlilzad who served as America's Ambassador to Kabul when the first presidential election was held summed up the situation well. "Five years ago, I had the privilege of representing the United States in Afghanistan as we helped Afghanistan hold successful elections", he wrote in a newspaper article. "The country still needs our help. President Barack Obama has correctly recognised that success in Afghanistan is an important American priority. It is vital that the United States works actively to enable Afghan voices to be heard and to facilitate reconciliation, unity and stability after the people make their choice."⁵

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⁵ Zalmay Khalilzad, "How to make Afghan votes count", *Financial Times*, 12 August 2009, p. 7.