

ISAS Brief

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Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505
www.isas.nus.edu.sg
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



Elusive Peace in Afghanistan

Sajjad Ashraf¹

The Afghan government of national unity set up under an agreement brokered by the US Secretary of State John Kerry could only announce its first cabinet nominations on 12 January 2014, after 107 days of hard bargaining between two rival camps. The nominations will now be presented to the parliament for confirmation. The agreement made Ashraf Ghani the President and Abdullah Abdullah the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), a post akin to a prime minister, with effective powers.

Earlier in Kabul US General John Campbell addressing the mission-closure of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan said that the ISAF mission “made Afghanistan stronger and our countries safer.”² However, the fact that the ceremony was held in secret for the fear of Taliban attacks underscores the realities of Afghanistan. The withdrawal of international forces has come at a time when the resurgent Taliban are aggressively testing the will of the new national unity government.

¹ Mr Sajjad Ashraf is a Consultant at the Institute of South Asian Studies, an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS), and an Adjunct Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at NUS. He was Pakistan’s High Commissioner to Singapore from 2004 to 2008. He can be contacted at sashraf1947@gmail.com. Opinions expressed in this paper, based on research by the author, do not necessarily reflect the views of ISAS.

² *Times of India*, 28 December 2014. Nato ends its 13-year Afghan war, but insurgency boils.

Mission “Resolute Support” comprising 12,500 troops³ drawn from NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) countries replaces the ISAF. They will train and support the Afghan forces. Separately, US President Barack Obama has authorised a US Special Operations Force contingent that will carry out missions against the militants who threaten American or Afghan troops. All these foreign forces are now scheduled to remain in Afghanistan till 2016, a deadline whose removal President Ashraf Ghani has asked for.⁴ Since Ghani, who reportedly still keeps his US passport,⁵ survives with American support, it is much the role of this contingent that will be the cause of continued conflict in Afghanistan.

2014 was a particularly bad year for Afghanistan. Civilian and the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) casualties reached 3,188 and 4,600 respectively during the first ten months.⁶ The daring attacks on the ISAF and other government facilities confirm that international intervention has failed in Afghanistan. These developments emphasise the uncertainties war-ravaged Afghanistan will face in the future.

The 2014 presidential election, which Carl Bildt, the Swedish Foreign Minister predicted, “could well turn into an all-out battle for the country’s future”⁷ has proven more divisive than the US had thought. Charges of massive electoral fraud levelled by Abdullah Abdullah led to a recount, after which Ghani was again declared winner.

Disclosure of a recent European Union report pointing to systematic electoral fraud of more than two million votes⁸ – the figure alleged by Abdullah – will put pressure on the nominal power-sharing arrangement which has held for now. The two sides do not trust each other. Abdullah feels cheated. In 2009, the-then President, Hamid Karzai, admitted to ballot rigging but Abdullah mysteriously withdrew, leaving Karzai as the sole candidate before the runoff. Rumours abound that he was promised presidency in 2014, which was not to be.

In brokering this power-sharing, the US has not learnt from history. Afghanistan does not have a culture of power-sharing. Following the ouster of Soviet-supported Najibullah in

³ *ibid*

⁴ <http://www.straitstimes.com/news/asia/south-asia/story/afghan-president-says-us-might-want-re-examine-pullout-deadline-20150105#sthash.JQINdJOH.dpuf>

⁵ http://www.afghan-bios.info/index.php?option=com_afghanbios&id=539&task=view&total=3010&start=133&Itemid=2

⁶ Times of India, 28 December 2014. Nato ends its 13-year Afghan war, but insurgency boils

⁷ <http://www.project-syndicate.org/print/the-afghan-endgame-mirage>

⁸ *The New York Times*, 16 December 2014. Joseph Goldstein - E.U. Confirms Wide Fraud in Afghan Presidential Runoff Election

1992, the power-sharing deal that made Burhanuddin Rabbani the President, with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar as Prime Minister (1993-94) and Ahmed Shah Masoud as Defence Minister, led to a civil war in which 50,000⁹ civilians lost their lives in Kabul alone. This fighting led to the rise of Taliban.

Following the Communist takeover in April 1978, when power was initially shared between the Khalqi and Parchmi factions of the party, the power struggle soon led to the banishment of Parchmi leadership. In September 1979, during the Khalqi infighting, the president was killed and power was taken over by his deputy till the Soviet intervention in December 1979, when Parchmis took control. Earlier too, during the later years of King Zahir Shah's rule, his cousin Mohammad Daoud Khan remained Prime Minister with relatively free hand and built his own loyal power-base within the official circles. That phase, too, ended violently in 1973 after Daoud overthrew Zahir Shah and declared himself the President.

Much of the worry, now, about stability in Afghanistan relates to the ANSF, which the US built hoping that it will shore up the regime that the ISAF would be leaving behind. The ANSF, short on professionalism and deficient on equipment, will remain dependent upon the US for logistics, intelligence, air support and much more. The excessively high turnover of security personnel, due to the fear of Taliban and the general lack of care for the ordinary soldier, means that 60,000¹⁰ new recruits need to be found every year. In a society with strong tribal loyalties, young men find it difficult to resist peer pressure. So, they desert the security force. Increased security duties have caused more ANSF casualties in 2014. These figures are likely to rise further. With the cover of foreign forces gone, the morale of those who dared to join the ANSF will be tested.

Funding the ANSF remains a headache. Chicago Summit in 2012 decided that Afghan government would contribute US\$500 million annually towards security, starting in 2015 and taking on full costs by 2024.¹¹ The remaining US\$3.6 billion will be borne by the international community. Even if the Afghan contribution reaches US\$4.1 billion in 2024, inflation and additional needs mean that another US\$2.8 billion is required for keeping the force at the current levels.

Afghanistan faces severe budgetary constraints, leaving the country much at the mercy of

⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gulbuddin_Hekmatyar

¹⁰ <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/peopleandpower/2012/12/201212126227280456.html>

¹¹ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/06/12/who-will-pay-for-afghan-security-forces/>

international donors. According to the World Bank, the shortfall is at least 20 percent¹² of the need. Donor fatigue and consequent squeeze will have their own adverse implications for the future of the country.

Afghanistan is a Pashtun-majority country with tribal- and deeply-rooted in traditions and customs. Though loosely united, it has always had a nominal central figure to whom others owed allegiance. The Western system, where power is divided, does not blend with the culture and psyche of the Afghan society.

Afghanistan cannot be stabilised without more active regional and international cooperation. Yet the interests of many regional players collide. The collision of India-Pakistan interests in Afghanistan does not bode well for stability in the country. The Afghans have not let a foreign military campaign succeed on their territory. If the United States had learnt from history, this ill-conceived war was unwinnable from the beginning. The Afghans are better off left to themselves.

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¹² http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/afghan-economy-facing-serious-revenue-shortage/2014/04/15/6ddce38a-5be9-46ad-8f3b-1eb2ef4ed9bd_story.html