

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind



August 27, 2018

Atmar's Unprecedented Resignation: Main Assumptions

Afghanistan's national security adviser, Hanif Atmar, resigned on Saturday. He supported president Ghani in 2014 presidential elections and was appointed as the national security adviser of Afghanistan by Ashraf Ghani and signed the bilateral strategic Agreement between the United States of America and Afghanistan. He was one of the most influential advisers to President Ashraf Ghani and was widely considered to be the second-most powerful official in Afghanistan.

Why Atmar resigned now

Political analysts have contradicting views on what motives made Atmar to resign. They doubt if he has resigned due to differences he had with the government on political level, as well as their approach to maintaining peace and stability in the country. They hold that the political policy of the government and the peace and stability approaches in the country have not changed dramatically since 2014 when president Ghani assumed office in Afghanistan. Thus, different reasons have been mentioned for his resignation that some of them include:

First, many observers believe Atmar's resignation is his first move in a plan to run for the presidency in next year's elections. Atmar as one of the closest and second most powerful men in the country could make teams in different sectors in Afghanistan. These teams will support him in the coming presidential elections. He may not have the chance to win the elections but will play a critical role in dividing the ballots that can play a critical role in turning the elections results to the favor of Ashraf Ghani in the coming elections as it is expected he may be challenged by a powerful rival of a Tajik presidential candidate. This will prevent the elections to go to the second round and to prevent speculating widespread electoral fraud and likely political violence in the country.

Second, Atmar, who began his security career with the Soviet Union-backed government in the late 1980s, is still seen as close to Russia. As he has pointed out grave differences on peace and stability with the leadership of Government have been the cause of his resignation. As the peace process and stability are the main concerns of the United States and allies in Afghanistan, and Russia, China and south Asian countries are increasingly taking roles in the process, the United States and allies may have had concerns about the process mainly channeled and led by the National Security Adviser of the Afghan president. Thus, U.S. military commanders recently had acknowledged that little progress was being made on the battlefield or at the peace table despite a reported meeting last month between a U.S. diplomat and Taliban leaders to explore possible negotiations. Further, Trump, had expressed frustration that U.S. forces still seem so far from withdrawal after 17 years of war. In a policy shift during a June ceasefire, Washington said it would "support, facilitate, and participate" in any Kabul government-led peace talks with the Taliban. But, such a policy shift required new leadership. Political analysts assume that The White House and the State Department appointed Khalilzad as the US special envoy on Afghanistan to lead Afghan peace process. They say Atmar and Khalilzad have contradicting interests and viewpoints on many issues of Afghanistan including the peace process. As a result they were not able to work together; and also the USA does not trust Atmar due to his background and previous relations with the Russia and the United Kingdom.

Third, some political analysts hold that as there is widening differences between the NUG leadership and deep divisions among the United States, England and Russia and continued conflicts between India and Pakistan and complicated political games of the Afghan neighboring and regional powers have further complicated the situation in Afghanistan. Also, political tensions are mounting in the country; people are increasingly disappointed from the government and insecurity is threatening nearly all parts of the country. They hold that such uncertain future may force the regional and international players in Afghanistan to form a temporary government until the presidential elections in 2019 and Hanif Atmar would head the temporary government.

Deterioration of security in different parts of the country, beginning the new phase of peace process in Afghanistan by appointment of Khalilzad as the special envoy of the US, presidential elections and Atmar's background with Russia and England are the factors that have been influential on Atmar's resignation. Resignation of Atmar will have specific effects on the security and peace process in Afghanistan. As a result, we will witness a turning point in the peace and security in the country.



Reactions over the Surprise Resignation of Top Security Officials

By Mohammad Zahir Akbari

The top security officials had resigned from their positions but today (Sunday) their resignation has been rejected except the national security advisor that shortly after his resignation was replaced by Mr. Hamdullah Mohib, the ambassador to Washington DC, as new National Security Adviser. It was Late last night that confirmed that the minister of defense, Tariq Shah Bahrami, the minister of the interior, Wais Barmak, and the National Directorate of Security chief, Masoom Stanekzai, had resigned following the national security advisor. "We have received four resignations by two ministers and two senior security officials," quoted from an official in President Ashraf Ghani's office on Saturday. A copy of Atmar's resignation letter was circulating in social media network in which he said he resigned due to "serious differences over policies and approaches at the top level of government." In the letter, Atmar also thanked the president for having trust in him for four years.

The Arg (presidential palace) also issued a statement minutes after his resignation stating the president has accepted Atmar's resignation and has appointed Hamdullah Mohib, Afghan ambassador to the U.S. as the new national security adviser. The reasons given by Ghani for asking them to resign was said to be the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, amid deadly attacks carried out by suspected Islamic State militants, including last week's rocket attack on the presidential palace and the recent Ghazni attack, and the increasing defence and security forces casualties.

In fact, it was very frustrating when recently Afghanistan witnessed a deadly surge in insurgency that Taliban briefly overrunning Ghazni city, multiple military bases and check posts across the country killing over than hundreds of people, and burnt nearly 2000 shops in Ghazni city, as reported by Tolonews. Heavy and continued fighting between Taliban insurgents and Afghan forces as well as repeated suicide attacks in Kabul and other major cities, have underlined the dire security situation facing Afghanistan. With parliamentary elections due on October 20, authorities had been bracing for more attacks. But even so, the scale of the violence has shocked government officials, who are facing bitter criticism over their handling of the war.

Shortly before they submitted their resignation at least two people were killed and four others wounded on Saturday when a suicide bomber detonated his vest full of explosives near the office of the Election Commission in eastern Nangarhar province, officials said. Attahullah Khogyani, spokesman for the provincial governor, said the wounded were brought to the regional hospital in the capital city Jalalabad with one in critical condition. He said the casualty count would likely rise. Doctors were trying to save the lives of the wounded, said Inamullah Miakhail, spokesman for the public health direc-

tor in Nangarhar. The attack happened when supporters of a candidate for parliament who was rejected by the Election Commission gathered to protest near the commission's office, said Khogyani. Several vehicles were damaged in the attack, he added.

President Ashraf Ghani's angry decision to call for the resignation of his security cabinet came with a huge surprise and reactions reflected in public and social media network for the resignation of top security officials; Dr. Abdullah Abdullah did not agree with Ghani's decision over the collective resignation of security cabinet, and so the last three resignations has been rejected. As regards national security advisor most of people believe that the successive resignations were not a technical decision but a political decision. Many of the Facebook users warmly welcomed his resignation while others claimed that Atmar resigned as he was considering running against Ghani in the 2019 presidential elections. A few others expressed it happened due to deep disagreement between Ghani and Atmar criticizing how a young diplomat, who lived in Washington DC and unaware from security situation of Afghanistan, can fill this important position.

One Facebook user, Ibrahim Hekmati said: "A right decision but the late one. Another Facebook user, Torialai Rahmani said: "If we don't ignore the reality, security is bad all over the country and this decision by President Ghani is worth appreciation." Some of political analyst stressed that security condition deteriorated during the position was occupied by him and he should be prosecuted and respond to the public about his past deed as a national security advisor. "Resignation will not recover any pain of the people. There should be a law to ask them what they have done during their term," said Naqibullah Rashidi on Facebook. One Facebook user went as far as to say Ghani was losing his own allies.

Anyway, originally Atmar is from Laghman province and completed his studies in London. He has been a mainstay in Afghanistan politics since the late 1980s, when he began his security career under the Soviet Union-backed government. Atmar has previously served as the minister of interior, minister of education, and minister of rural rehabilitation and development. He became national security adviser after Ghani was sworn in as president in late 2014. He was one of the most influential advisers to President Ashraf Ghani and widely considered to be the second-most powerful official in Afghanistan. Overall, he enjoyed strong relations with Ghani in the past and was even honored with a medal in 2016 but finally "Mr Atmar has declared the realities that he could not work with the system which has a new strategy and plan every other minute," said Freshta Amini, an MP.

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Crunch time in Pakistan

By James M. Dorsey

It's crunch time in Pakistan. Resolving Pakistan's financial crisis is likely to require newly appointed prime minister Imran Khan to not only accept an International Monetary Fund (IMF) straightjacket but tackle his and Pakistan's convoluted relationship to militancy.

With the breeding ground for militancy built into the country's DNA and Mr. Khan owing his electoral victory in part to the spoiler role played by militants in Pakistani elections, tackling militancy is a tall order. Add to that Mr. Khan's ultra-conservative social attitudes as well as his abetting of militant concerns.

Mr. Khan, who was once dubbed Taliban Khan because of his support of the Afghan Taliban, advocacy for the opening in Pakistan of an official Taliban Pakistan office, allowing government funds to go to militant madrassas, and enabling Islamists to dictate the content of public school textbooks, is nonetheless likely to find that he has no choice.

To secure IMF support, Mr. Khan will have to avoid blacklisting by an international watchdog, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), and ensure removal from the group's grey list by not only reinforcing anti-money laundering and terrorism finance measures but also rigorously implementing them.

That would require both the acquiescence of Pakistan's powerful military and a reversal of Mr. Khan's publicly espoused positions. In many ways, Mr. Khan's positions have been more in line with those of the military, including his assertion that militancy in Pakistan was the result of the United States' ill-conceived war on terror rather than a history of support of militant proxies that goes back to Pakistan's earliest days, than he has often been willing to acknowledge.

"If terrorism is not indigenous to Pakistan, and merely imported, then it follows that no larger reckoning of the state's and society's relationship with religion can or should take place — a convenient conclusion for religious hardliners," said South Asia scholar Ahsan I. Butt.

Juggling the demands of multi-lateral agencies and Pakistan's reality is likely to trap Mr. Khan in a Catch-22 of centrifugal forces that include the roots of militancy enhanced by what Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells termed "the rise of the networked society."

The appeal of the militants' intolerance and supremacism, rooted in a literal interpretation of the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed, is reinforced by advances in information technology and proliferation of media that in Mr. Castells' approach created "a world of uncontrolled, confusing change" that compelled people "to regroup around primary identities; religious, ethnic, territorial, (and) national."

Mr. Khan's harsh reality is nonetheless likely to be also shaped by Pakistan's handling of men like Abdul Rehman al-Dakhil, a probable litmus test of the seriousness of its anti-terrorism measures.

An alleged operational leader of Lashkar-e-Taiba, a group sanctioned by both the United Nations and the United States that openly operates through proxies despite being banned in Pakistan, Mr. Al-Dakhil together with two "financial facilitators" was last month identified by the US State Department as a globally designated terrorist.

"Today's action notifies the U.S. public and the international community that Abdul Rehman al-Dakhil has committed, or poses a significant risk of committing acts of terrorism," the State Department said.

Hafez Saeed, the alleged mastermind of the 2008 attacks in Mumbai and leader of Lashkar-e-Taiba and its front organization, Jamaat-ud-Dawa, constitutes a similar litmus test as Mr. Khan seeks to demonstrate to FATF compliance with agreed measures to counter money-laundering and terrorism finance.

The fact that Mr. Saeed despite having been designated a global terrorist by the United Nations Security Council and the State Department, which put a US\$10 million bounty on his head, remains a free man and was able to field candidates in last month's election figured prominently in FATF's decision to put Pakistan on a grey list.

To demonstrate its sincerity, Pakistan in advance of the election passed the Anti-Terrorism Ordinance of 2018, which gave groups and individuals, including Mr. Saeed, designated by the UN as international terrorists

the same status in Pakistan for the first time.

Pakistan also sought to curtail the ability of Mr Saeed's organizations' to perform social and charity work, a pillar of their popularity, by confiscating ambulances operated by his charity, closing Jamaat-ud-Dawa offices and handing control of its madrassas to provincial governments.

The fact that Mr. Saeed's candidates and other militants did not bag National Assembly seats in last month's election would suggest at first glance that it would be easier for the military and Mr. Khan to radically alter their approach to militancy.

That, however, ignores the significance of the militants capturing almost ten percent of the vote and helping deprive Mr. Khan's main rival, ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), of votes in crucial electoral districts, according to an analysis of the Pakistan Election Commission's results by constituency as well as a Gallup Pakistan survey.

It also fails to take into account the extra-parliamentary influence militants garner from their role as spoilers as well as their societal roots.

"In Pakistan, parliamentary seats alone do not a victory make. The religious political parties, particularly the newcomer extremist variety, may not have won big, but they have much to celebrate. Primarily, they can revel in their successful hijacking of this election's political narratives. Rather than moderate their positions in order to compete, they managed to radicalise part of the mainstream political discourse," said journalist Huma Yusuf.

Exploiting what governance expert Rashid Chaudhry dubbed "the politics of emotion," Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), campaigning on a platform calling for strict implementation of Islamic law as well as Pakistan's draconian blasphemy law, emerged from the election as Pakistan's fifth largest party.

TLP, headed by Islamic scholar Khadim Hussain Rizvi, garnered four percent of the vote even if it only won two seats in Sindh's provincial assembly and one in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The Gallup survey said anecdotal evidence showed that TLP votes pushed PML-N to second position in many districts, "one reason for the loss of PML-N seats."

Not surprisingly, Mr. Khan has echoed TLP's insistence on the principle of Khatam-i-Nabuwat, or the finality of Mohammed's prophethood, that pervades Pakistan's body politic. "We are standing with Article 295c and will defend it," Khan said referring to a clause in the constitution that mandates the death penalty for any "imputation, insinuation or innuendo" against the Prophet Muhammad.

Mr. Khan's newly appointed human rights minister, Shireen Mazari, a controversial academic, who two decades ago advocated nuclear strikes against Indian population centres in the event of a war, condemned on her first day in office a Dutch government decision to support an exhibition of cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed by a member of parliament.

TLP supporters ransacked an Ahmadi mosque in the city of Faisalabad less than a week after Mr. Khan was sworn in, shooting and wounding six people. Supporters of TLP and Mr. Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) targeted an Ahmadi house of worship in Sialkot in May.

Mr. Khan's backing of the blasphemy clause that has served as a ramming rod against minorities and a means to whip crowds into a frenzy and at times turn them into lynch mobs and inspired vigilante killings came as no surprise to Mr. Butt, the South Asia scholar, who noted shortly after the election that "Khan's ideology and beliefs on a host of dimensions are indistinguishable from the religious hard-right."

Yet, securing international support for inevitable structural reform of the Pakistani economy will have to involve breaking with militancy, implementing international standards in anti-money laundering and terrorism finance, and pushing concepts of pluralism and tolerance that are anathema to the religious hard-right. For Mr. Khan to succeed, that seemingly will amount to having to square a circle.

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