

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

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Can Pakistan Meeting Broker Talks between Taliban and Afghan Government?

Peace talks are being debated hotly amidst the escalated militancy and Afghanistan's tit-for-tat policy. The Afghan government has intensified its offensive attacks against the Taliban militants to put pressure on their leadership to come to the negotiating table with the government.

Moreover, the Kabul government has urged regional stakeholders to play their role in Kabul's de-marginalization in the peace talks. Pakistan is a heavyweight stakeholder in Afghanistan's peace process and urged to put its weight behind the intra-Afghan dialogue.

A number of Afghan political figures, including the leader of Hizb-e-Islami Afghanistan (HIA) Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, former Balkh governor Atta Mohammad Noor, and second deputy CEO Mohammad Mohaqeq, have reportedly traveled to Pakistan to attend a meeting, with the presence of some Taliban members. At least 30 senior Afghan leaders are said to be invited in the meeting.

The participants of the meeting had a dialogue with the Taliban earlier this month in Moscow, but it had no impact on Afghanistan's security situation and the Taliban turned down the demand of their interlocutors for declaring "ceasefire".

The Pakistan meeting, in which head of Afghan High Peace Council Mohamad Karim Khalili has also attended, is likely to bridge the mistrust between Kabul and Islamabad.

It should be noted that the Pakistan meeting is of the same nature to that of Russia. If the meeting yields a positive outcome rather than empty talks, Afghan politicians and ordinary people will change their attitude towards Islamabad and the space for optimism will be expanded. Hence, the ball is in Pakistan's court to prove its genuine intention for Afghanistan's peace process through using its leverage to bring the Kabul government and Taliban leaders to peace table. But if this meeting ends up with no tangible result, it will be construed as giving legitimacy to the Taliban's leadership and no different to the Moscow meeting.

The participation of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who has a strong bond with Pakistan, in the meeting will be significant. The Afghan government signed a peace agreement with Hekmatyar in September 2016 and pardoned him for his involvement in deadly incidents and terrorist activities. Subsequently, the UN removed his name from the sanctions on 3 February 2017 as a result of Afghanistan's demand. Meanwhile, the HIA vowed to respect the Afghan Constitution in exchange for the government recognition of the group and support for the removal of United Nations and American sanctions against Hekmatyar.

Since then, Hekmatyar, who runs for presidency, has been calling on the Taliban to stop the conflict and join peace process. However, the Taliban turned a deaf ear to his call and continued their insurgency. Now Hekmatyar is calling the Taliban face-to-face to stop their terrorist activities and agree to power-sharing similar to himself.

But the Taliban still puts the legitimacy of the Afghan government under question as did Hekmatyar before peace agreement.

Pakistan hosts the meeting days before President Ghani's official visit to Islamabad. Ghani is going to travel to Islamabad in late June and exchange view on peace talks and Kabul-Islamabad mutual cooperation with Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan. His trip is aimed at creating mutual trust and strengthening relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Despite the fact that peace talks heat up, the conflict between warring sides has been escalated. As the Taliban declared their spring offensive and turned down the demand of people's representatives in Loya Jirga, Grand Assembly, for declaring truce and holding intra-Afghan dialogue, the Afghan government continues its tit-for-tat policy. Both warring sides sustain heavy casualties on daily basis, but Afghan civilians bear the brunt of casualties as the Taliban carry out indiscriminate attacks and suicide bombings. For instance, a large number of Afghan civilians were killed during the Ramadan, the holy month of Muslims, as a result of the Taliban's attacks.

It is believed that the war-war and talk-talk policy will not lead to peace or stability in Afghanistan. The Taliban have to observe the rule of talks and hold dialogue with the Afghan government, against which they are fighting, and mitigate their insurgency.

If the Taliban continue their relentless attacks despite the ongoing talks, Afghanistan's neighboring countries, notably Pakistan, and regional and global actors have to put pressure on the Taliban to hold talks with the Kabul government with bona fide intention rather than seeking one-sided concessions. Afghan officials and political experts are of the view that Pakistan are able to nudge the Taliban to the table with the Afghan government. Brokering peace talks between the Taliban and the Kabul government is likely to be a big step towards peace.

Afghan Peace Process: What has been Done and What is Needed to be Done?

By: Jalal Shams

After the Trump administration in the United States in January 2017, president Trump appointed Zalmay Khalilzad as U.S. special envoy to Afghanistan. His job was to bring the Afghan government and the Taliban to a reconciliation. When Khalilzad took his new assignment in September 2018, he told diplomatic colleagues that he probably had six to twelve months to produce a breakthrough for the president.

For the US, there are two key topics for negotiating with the Taliban: ensuring that renewed 9/11-style attacks cannot emanate from Afghan territory and complete withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan (The US currently has 14,000 soldiers in Afghanistan). Additionally, there are some 8,000 troops from 38 NATO and non-NATO countries) which has always been the Taliban's main demand. Taliban are more concerned about the withdrawal of foreign troops from the country, and after the complete withdrawal, "they are ready to welcome US engineers, doctors and others if they want to come back for reconstruction of Afghanistan." Said by Sher Muhammad Abbas Stanakzai; former head of the Taliban office in Doha.

In the beginning, Khalilzad thought that negotiating with the Taliban will be an easy task therefore, he started negotiating with the Taliban without involving Afghan government. First few meetings were successful and Khalilzad was very optimistic about peace deal with the Taliban. The US and the Taliban have largely agreed on a key demand of Washington: that the Taliban should not allow Afghanistan to be used by armed groups. But a major sticking point remains the refusal of the Taliban to negotiate with current Afghan government.

But when Taliban refused to join the current system, they made it clear that they would not simply 'join' or be 'integrated' into the current system and lay down their arms, as this would be surrender for them, and they instead demand 'reform', including a new constitution drafted by "Afghan (religious) scholars and intellectuals."

After this demand by Taliban, reaction came from Afghan government and majority of the Afghan population, they were unwilling to surrender the democratic and human rights, including women's and minorities rights that are enshrined in the current constitution.

Afghan President Muhammad Ashraf Ghani publicly said: "Afghans do not accept an interim government-not today, not tomorrow, not in a hundred years." There were indications of widespread fears in the Afghan public that US-Taliban talks may be a withdrawal-only "exit strategy" for the US, rather than a peace agreement.

After the punitive reaction from Afghan government and people, the US said it would agree to the withdrawal of its "combat troops" from Afghanistan "only in return for the Taliban's entering talks with the Afghan government and agreeing to a lasting cease-fire" Khalilzad stressed elsewhere that all talks would take place in accordance with the principle that "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed."

What was missing in the Khalilzad mission?

- Considering the current Afghan government underdog at

the current peace talks with the Taliban

- Not including Afghan Government at the peace negotiation.
- Neglecting Pakistan's role in the peace process with the Taliban.

What is Pakistan's Stand on the negotiation with Taliban?

We know Pakistan has had contacts with Taliban since the beginning. These contacts were very deep, have not paused when the Taliban lost power. Thus, Pakistan would not break with Taliban. Before last year ceasefire, it was thought that Taliban are divided in different groups and it will be difficult to have a peace agreement with them. However, last year's three days ceasefire between Taliban and Afghan government shows that there is a single leadership which control the group and I am sure that Pakistan still influences their leadership which are being used for their benefits. The failure of US talks with the Taliban without involving Pakistan confirms on thing that Pakistan will never allow Taliban to come to an agreement with the US until their interests are stretched.

What Afghan government needs to do?

Afghan government is the only entity which can have a peace deal with the Taliban. The US can only play a facilitating role in the negotiation process between the Afghan government and Taliban. Similarly, Afghan political parties, elders, and youth can have dialogue with the Taliban in an attempt to convince them to come to the negotiating table with Afghan government. It's time for the current president of Afghanistan Muhammad Ashraf Ghani to play a significant role in bringing peace to the country. On the other hand, Pakistan is facing economic crisis and some international pressure over the non-state actors operating in the region, a fact best highlighted by the Financial Action Task Force.

There seems a clash of ideas within the Pakistani Army wherein there have been signals towards normalizing relations with the neighboring countries like India and Afghanistan. While the recently reported reduction in cross border infiltration in Kashmir and the opening of Kartarpur corridor have been welcome steps, the Pulwama attacks simultaneously reveal the dichotomous policies at work. Nevertheless, the dividends from peace, regional connectivity and open border could far outweigh the ongoing precarious power play Pakistan attempts to impose on the region.

All these benefits notwithstanding, any progress will only depend on how the prevailing pressure on Pakistan is exploited to the best of Afghanistan's and South Asia's interests. Given Pakistan's relatively weak bargaining power, not only the Washington led international community could get the Taliban to talk to the Ghani regime, the time is also ripe to arrive at an increase peace, again which would only be achieved if the elected regime in Kabul is roped in.

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New Challenges to Voters' Registration Process

By: Mohammad Zahir Akbari

Three days ago, the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) informed of progress in the voters' registration process with announcing a relatively high level of statistics. If, according to their first figure, they have registered around 400,000 voters, it shows a major step forward and a promising improvement in this regard but according to their second figure, not only it shows a lower figure but also shows a lower coordination among the IEC commissioners.

Last year, before the parliamentary elections, though there were some problems in process of voters' registration, they were more mental and psychological problems than being physical and objective challenges. As there was a rumor across the country that the Taliban would cut the fingers of those who participate in election or label stickers on their National ID card and this would be checked anywhere by Taliban. On the basis of their repeated announcement, they warned all Afghans to punish if they participate or assist the electoral process in the country. The rumor was so strong that made many people, especially those who need to travel outside cities, to refuse registering in the established voters registering centers; therefore, their ID cards remained white until the end and as such hundreds of thousands of people refrained from the registration process, and eventually did not participate in the Elections.

But in any case, that rumor and lack of participation by some of the people in their political destiny did not result in postponement or suspension of elections. However, many parliamentary candidates did not accept the primary results of the election. Supporters of failed candidates blocked roads that connect the Afghan capital to the northern part of the country. For half of a day, the International airport of the capital was locked down due to protests related to the election. Several women candidate continued their protest almost up to the day. Given that, there are serious concerns that the upcoming presidential polls will be similarly face with allegations of fraud and incompetence.

Anyway, the parliamentary elections were held with its problems, and now we see the presence of new representatives in the national house. In the eve of the presidential elections, it seems that there is strong interest in public participation into the voter registration process. But apparently there are some new problems that are more real and objective. The problem is due to the fact that the election commission has opened limited voters' registration centers only in the center of districts which is very far from remote villages and mountainous areas. While the people who remained deprived of election participation lives in the hard-to-reach geography, especially the large districts. For example, the people who live in some parts of Hecha, Patu and Khairo village of Jaghori, it takes almost 3 - 4 hours time by car

to reach the Center of Jaghori, Sangi-Masha, while comparing to the small provinces or districts of the country, it takes less than 4-5 minutes by walk to reach the centers.

Moreover, According to the new electoral law, the entire electoral process must be carried out electronically by biometrics in which case all Afghans should have been registered again. But due to the lack of sufficient facilities and lack of enough time for this work, only the enhancing registration has been decided to be carried out. In this case, only those who have not been able to label their ID cards with stickers and newly qualified for vote can come to the registration centers. As aforementioned, these centers are very limited and only considered for the center of districts which have caused widespread criticisms and problems in many parts of the country, especially the large districts. Nevertheless, the complaints have not led to positive result yet and the Electoral Commissions have not responded to people.

As a result, in addition to the security challenges in many parts of the country, the Afghan people are faced with another problem which is the lack of access to registration centers. Unfortunately, it is true for many districts of the highlands geography of central regions. For many parts of these districts, it takes more than one day walking for deprived people to be able to participate in the process. While for many of weak or old men and women, it is not feasible to reach the registering centers.

On the other hand, the suspension of the provincial council elections will also discourage participation in the registration process which eventually may further weaken the election. Many people do not have much incentive to spend an entire day for merely registration. These concerns will be more serious when combined with the experience and images they have from the past elections and election transparency. Now, it is almost ten days that the registration process has been started and apparently the Commission has registered nearly 400,000 people but according to the reports received from the fields, it is much less than what is heard from the official addresses. For example, according to a report received from Daikondi, only 1,500 people have been registered and the participation is reported very weak due to mentioned reasons.

Consequently, it is expected that the Electoral Commission should make a new decision to respond to the demands of people and send enough registration teams to the remote areas of the country. If this does not happen, undoubtedly many people will remain deprived from the election participation process and will not be able to participate in deciding their political destiny as defined in the ruling democratic system.

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