

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

Daily  
**Outlook**  
AFGHANISTAN  
The Leading Independent Newspaper

October 19, 2019

## Ifs and Buts in Resumption of Peace Talks

Afghan peace process has passed many ups and downs and had come close to a deal last month but called off by US President Donald Trump. A reported meeting between the Taliban delegation and US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad in Islamabad earlier this month have generated hopes of the resumption of peace talks. Last week, at a rally in Minnesota, Trump indicated that he was ready to re-engage with the Taliban. "We're pulling people out and we're trying to make good deals and we're going to bring our soldiers back home," he said. Meanwhile, Suhail Shaheen, spokesperson to the Taliban's political office in Qatar, said in an exclusive interview to CNN-News18's Zakka Jacob that there was no military solution and "peaceful solution" was the best option. Regarding the exclusion of the Kabul administration in the peace talks, he said after the peace deal was signed with the United States, "then we turn to the internal part of the Afghan issue and that is talking to all Afghan sides and this includes the Kabul administration - the current one - because we know they are also a party to the conflict". He added that the Taliban were already in the negotiation with the US side. "We had about nine rounds of talks with the American negotiation team. We had completed discussing the peace agreement and it only has to be signed," he said. The Taliban also said earlier that no further changes were being made to the previous deal during the talks, and that the group stood ready to sign it. To this end, both the Taliban and the US are willing to resume the talks. Washington will urge inclusion of the Afghan government in the talks and a reduction in violence. Nonetheless, there seems to be no indication of the Taliban changing their stance and they are likely to persist on signing the agreement drafted after holding nine rounds of talks with the US representatives in Doha. In short, there is no incentive for the Taliban to accept a ceasefire without a deal in place, which makes the resumption of the talks more difficult.

The presence of Khalilzad in Islamabad during the Taliban visit was no coincidence. Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan had assured US officials during his meetings on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly session that he would help the resumption of the Afghan peace process. During Hamid Karzai administration, the US and Afghan governments believed that the key to unlocking the door to peace was held by Pakistan. Generals Kayani and Pasha were at the center of the US and NATO attention. Kayani took three white papers to Washington; one in 2009, the second in July 2010 and the third in October 2010. In Washington, they came to be known as 'Kayani 1.0', 'Kayani 2.0' and 'Kayani 3.0'.

However, Pakistan's reception given to the Taliban delegation raised many eyebrows in Afghanistan. President Ashraf Ghani administration showed a strong reaction to the Taliban visit to Islamabad urging that peace talks should be Afghan-owned and Afghan-led. Afghan officials believe that negotiations without the Kabul administration are unlikely to bring in sustainable peace.

A major objection to the US-Taliban draft deal was that there was no assurance from the Taliban to adhere to a permanent ceasefire. Then there was also no firm commitment from the Taliban to open direct talks with the Afghan government. So any resumption of peace talks is predicted on the Taliban's softening position on those two issues.

Laurel Miller, who was the acting special representative for Afghanistan from 2013 to 2017, said in a recent interview to the National Public Radio, "The US is going to have to find a way to demonstrate, both to the parties in Afghanistan but also to the important countries in the region, that it's still serious about negotiating and that it's not simply fickle."

The talks should be inclusive, and both the Afghan government and regional stakeholders have to be included in them. It is self-explanatory that Islamabad exercises influence over the Taliban leadership, many of whose members have their families living in Pakistan. Thus, Islamabad should exhort the Taliban to agree to a ceasefire and talk to Kabul.

Meanwhile, the Kabul administration should form a national consensus to negotiate with the Taliban. Continuation of mistrust between the Afghan government and political leaders will deal a strong blow to the peace process.

## Pathology of the Afghan Presidential Election

By: Mohammad Zahir Akbari

Election pathology does not mean to ignore the positive points but it can be considered as a good step towards changing deficiencies to efficiencies in the future. Therefore, election pathology is a very important topic in Afghanistan to identify the election positive and negative aspects and identify the way for future. If we do not have a good evaluation from the past, we would not be able to build on its achievements in the future and probably will repeat the same mistakes and pay unnecessary expenses. Given the emphasis of inclusive participation of people, and given the common vulnerability of the elections in young democracy of Afghanistan, it is necessary to identify some key factors which had negative impacts on the past elections.

The first and most important factor which affected the inclusiveness and soundness of few last elections is insecurity. Under the shadow of public security, all citizens from all parts of the country can participate to use their vote safely without physical and psychological fear from the enemies. While in insecure environment, it is considered like a competitive ground for both government and armed opposing groups to gain more political advantages. For this reason, the electoral process has been severely damaged by insecurity condition since the beginning of current decade up to date. Unfortunately, this factor was seriously intensified near the Election Day and Taliban had unprecedentedly warned the citizens not to participate in the election.

The second factor which can seriously damage the national process is legal defectiveness. Neither the national constitution nor the electoral law has determined any specific criteria for those who nominate themselves, perhaps it is justified as open opportunity for everyone. In other countries, there are different criteria which not only introduce the most talented and loyal personality to the process but also prevent from most irregularities and unqualified candidates. One of the main factors for most electoral issues was the large number of candidates as well as nomination of persons who are not qualified to become the president of a great nation. Therefore, in addition to making amendments to the electoral law and electoral commission structure, there is also necessary to add a legal filter to assess candidates' competences so as to refrain from unwanted issues.

Moreover, there was another flaw in process which restricted the voters from election participation while according to article No 5 of the election law the voters shall vote freely. The imposition of any direct or indirect restrictions on voters and candidates because of their language, religion, ethnicity, sex, tribe, residence and social status is prohibited in the law. Unfortunately, any unnecessary restrictions were imposed on these elections. For Example, women had restrictions to access polling stations, especially in mountainous areas. In addition, biometrics and

voters' list had a serious problem which impeded many voters from using their votes while a number of people voted without biometrics. Lack of legal clarity in this regard has not only created a lot of controversy but also affected the outcome of the election.

The third problem was lack of interest of people and electoral tickets from the election process. It took almost a complete year to form strong electoral teams. Only two or three teams could start their campaigns with rallies and speeches among their supporters. The other Afghan presidential candidates did not go the campaign and even did not have provincial trips until the last election days. Active electoral teams had limited campaigns in secure provinces such as the central areas and some region in northern and southern provinces. There were various reasons for the issue and the rumor market was also hot in the social media networks and among opponent supporters. The Free and Fair Elections Foundation of Afghanistan (FIFA) expressed concern over the low level of election campaigns, saying that the international community's participation in the elections was low and that the organizing bodies were faced many problems.

The fourth problem was worries about poor management. In modern democratic countries, political parties, citizens, and election organizers adhere to rules and boundaries of the election process. They pay Particular attention to the candidates' programs and manage the elections well. They strive for accuracy, integrity and proper execution as election considered the main opponent of democracy. In the post-election period, certain political practices are also followed. For example, they evaluate the inappropriate behaviors and damages happened on political elites, people, system and so on.

In regard to damages on political elites in election of Afghanistan, the election left serious consequences on social position of some traditional leaders as they could not attract the necessary votes were expected. In regard to damages on people, some of the candidate supporters did not respect code of conduct and they tried to use from any options and language which have negatively impacted on national unity. In regard to damages on rule of law, as democracy of Afghanistan is very young and we have limited experience from democratic process, we should have national and international observers in the elections. The presence of election observers in a country like Afghanistan that lacks confidence in impartiality on electoral commissions, affirms the legitimacy of the elections. Based article 102 of election law, the observers should be present in three stages: during campaign, on Election Day and during counting votes. On contrary to the ruling law, the election commission did not allow observers to be present during all steps of counting process.

Mohammad Zahir Akbari is the permanent writer of the Daily Outlook Afghanistan. He can be reached at mohammadzahirakbari@gmail.com

## The Survival of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe

By: Sławomir Sierakowski

Is populism in Central and Eastern Europe finally losing its momentum? In Poland, opposition parties won the Senate, and the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party's share of the vote slipped to 43.7%, from 45.5% in European Parliament elections this past May. And in Hungary's local elections, the opposition retook power in Budapest and won mayoral races in ten other cities.

The question now is whether these results augur a broader political shift in the region. The PiS's retention of power in the Sejm - the lower and more powerful chamber of Poland's parliament - is undeniably a significant success. But the party's strongman leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, was clearly expecting a better result. The PiS's loss of the Senate means that it can no longer ram through controversial legislation without any real debate (though its 235 votes in the Sejm will still allow it to override Senate vetoes).

The Polish opposition now has a chance to prove itself. Overall, opposition parties received 900,000 more votes than PiS's combined total. That means a narrow majority of the electorate is on the opposition's side, and could deliver a victory for a common opposition candidate in the presidential election next spring. There is no obvious choice for that role, however. Donald Tusk, the outgoing European Parliament president who formerly served as Poland's prime minister, has been all but forgotten, judging by his weak showing in opinion polls. Nonetheless, the opposition still has time to get organized.

The largest opposition party, Civic Platform (PO), maintained its previous level of support, running as part of the Civic Coalition, which won 27.2% of the vote. But PO's leader, Grzegorz Schetyna, fared poorly in Wrocław, and remains one of the country's least popular and most criticized politicians. Many want him to resign, and yet he has no obvious successor within PO, which comprises politicians Schetyna himself has elevated.

The PO's stagnation presents an opportunity for Lewica (The Left), a new left-wing coalition that received 12.5% of the vote. Although Lewica comprises three parties, it maintained a united front during the campaign, and has offered new, talented, and educated politicians an alternative platform to PO.

Still, the most immediate threat to PiS lies with the two parties whose supporters are culturally similar to its own. Konfederacja, which took 6.8% of the vote, will doubtless stoke political tension, whether by trafficking in anti-Semitism or demanding a total ban on abortion. And the conservative Polish People's Party (PSL) could siphon off PiS votes should the ruling party get into trouble.

For its part, PiS seems to have reached its electoral limit. While in power, it has maintained its popularity by increasing social benefits and announcing a near-doubling of the minimum wage by 2023. Three months before the election, it introduced a 500-złoty (\$128) child benefit. But despite favorable economic conditions, the party's support fell. Polish voters, it seems, have begun to fear absolute domination by any one party.

Looking ahead, PiS cannot count on another four years of strong economic growth. But it may think that it can use social spending to buy

time to cement its hold on the judiciary, the independent media, and local governments, thereby limiting the opposition's ability to win over voters even in case of a recession. Those moves are probably being planned for after the presidential election. Because the PiS incumbent, Andrzej Duda, needs over 50% of the vote to win re-election, the party must avoid doing anything too radical before then.

After that, PiS will have no real alternatives to autocracy, given that the next parliamentary election will be even more challenging for the party. There is a reason why it has been co-opting state institutions and the courts, and formulating legislation to "re-Polonize" the country's largely German- and American-owned media. These measures amount to Chekhov's gun: you don't hang a pistol on the wall in the first act unless it is going to be fired by the last. For the septuagenarian Kaczyński, the next four years are the last chance to consolidate power and forge a lasting legacy.

But beyond domestic politics, Kaczyński will also have to be wary of international factors. For example, US President Donald Trump's abandonment of the Kurds in Syria shows that he cannot be trusted as an ally. Would he really condone a crackdown on Poland's two largest commercial TV channels - TVN and TVN24 - or would he side with their American corporate owner, Discovery Inc.?

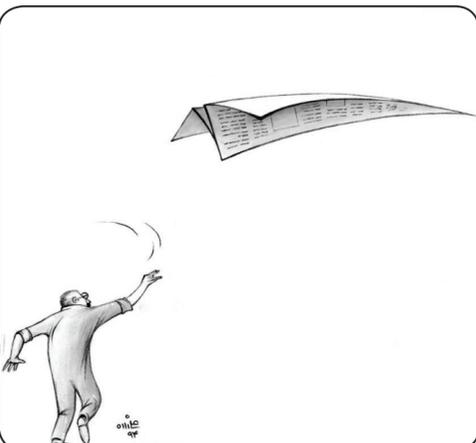
One might think that PiS could still civilize itself by moving to the center and appealing to some elements within the fragmented opposition. But this is highly unlikely. PO and Lewica voters are staunchly anti-PiS; indeed, that is one of the main issues that unites them. The 500-złoty child subsidy hardly matters to the country's wealthier families, and the announced minimum-wage increase has rattled business owners, who will have to bear the costs or lay off workers. PiS's only option, then, is to complete its autocratic revolution before another recession arrives. Kaczyński will have to go all in.

As for Hungary, the latest elections will have less of an immediate practical impact, because they were limited to local governments and large cities, where the opposition always has greater support. Maps of electoral support for PiS or for Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's ruling Fidesz usually make it look like large cities are being besieged.

Symbolically, though, Hungary's elections were more significant even than the election in Poland, because they show that opposition parties can still win in what is now a fully "illiberal democracy." Where opposition candidates prevailed, they did so without a free or sympathetic press, without an economic crisis to exploit, and without any significant errors on Orbán's part.

One could look at Central and Eastern Europe as a source of disappointment, given that populists are still getting elected and re-elected. Yet, unlike in autocracies elsewhere, the region's populists can still lose. Following Slovakian President Zuzana Čaputová's election earlier this year, the PiS's loss of the Senate and the Hungarian opposition's strong performance in major cities show that liberal democracy has yet to be snuffed out.

Sławomir Sierakowski, founder of the Krytyka Polityczna movement, is Director of the Institute for Advanced Study in Warsaw and Senior Fellow at the German Council on Foreign Relations.



Daily  
**Outlook**  
AFGHANISTAN  
The Leading Independent Newspaper

Chairman / Editor-in-Chief: Moh. Reza Huwaida

Vice Chairman / Exec. Editor: Moh. Sakhi Rezaie

Email: outlookafghanistan@gmail.com

Phone: 0093 (799) 005019/777-005019

www.outlookafghanistan.net

افغانستان  
The Daily Afghanistan Ma

The views and opinions expressed in the articles are those of the authors and do not reflect the views or opinions of the Daily Outlook Afghanistan.