
AFGHANISTAN IS HEADING FOR CIVIL WAR OR WORSE

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Davood Moradian is the director-general of the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies and former chief of programmes in President Hamid Karzai's office and chief policy adviser to Afghanistan's ministry of foreign affairs.

The ongoing political crisis within the Afghan National Unity Government amid the country's security and economic challenges recalls earlier warnings, notably from US intelligence and the UN, on the fragility of Afghanistan's political stability.

According to the agreement brokered by US Secretary of State John Kerry in September 2014, the Afghan government should have initiated a number of political and electoral reforms within two years. To date, there has been no meaningful step towards implementing these reforms.

The failure to implement the agreement is depriving the Afghan government of its main source of authority and legitimacy. In the coming weeks, there will be growing pressure on the very existence of the government from multiple constituencies.

For the first time since 2001, there are now political forces actively seeking to topple the Afghan government, in tandem with the Taliban's decades-old ideological terror campaign.

The current crisis is the result of early policy choices, institutional design and political games by Afghan elites and international actors. Averting an even nastier political crisis requires joint action by Afghan politicians and the international community.

Multitude of challenges

Afghanistan faces a multitude of challenges, chief among them socio-economic underdevelopment that requires long-term investment and efforts.

However, political and electoral reforms depend on the political will and consensus of the political elites and their international partners.

The implementation of the 2014 political agreement was conditional on three factors: President Ashraf Ghani's political will, chief executive Abdullah Abdullah's political skill and Washington's commitment. Sadly, all three were lacking.

Consistent with its past policies, Washington became complacent by failing to honour its role as the broker of the agreement and acquiescing to Ghani's fear-mongering strategy, disguised as reforms.

From the beginning, Ghani opted for the policy of invalidating the political agreement and focused instead on consolidating his position by creating a donor-friendly Ghilzai Pashtun administration.

Abdullah was torn between Washington's pressure to accommodate Ghani and demands from his restless Afghan constituencies to assert himself as the actual winner of the election and an equal partner in the government.

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However, and despite diminished public support and political trust, the implementation of the political agreement remains the best course of action to inject badly needed political pulses to a dying entity. To this end, there is a need for an annexed agreement to lay down a new and clear timeline and benchmarks for the implementation of the political agreement.

The three main stakeholders (Ghani, Abdullah and Washington) should no longer conduct their business as usual.

Washington is increasingly held responsible for tolerating Ghani's strategy of "Delay, Negotiate, Promise, and Deceive".

Washington's bitter memories of working with Hamid Karzai does not justify its current fatalistic approach. For his part, Abdullah should be more forthcoming with both Washington and his political and electoral constituencies.

The least bad option

The 2014 political agreement aimed to address two interlinked crises: a contested presidential election and a disputed presidential system.

The formation of the national unity government helped avert a major political crisis and was expected to initiate electoral and political reforms to address the structural crisis.

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The failure to hold meaningful national dialogue and carry out reforms has resulted in resurfacing the two crises. The Afghan government is threatened either by a sudden political collapse or a deepening political crisis.

Already overwhelmed by mounting security and economic difficulties, the country cannot afford a political crisis. An interim arrangement tasked with maintaining political continuity and preparing the country for an early presidential election is the least bad option.

To this end, a number of actors and assumptions should be challenged. Neither the former president nor the incumbent leadership possess the political capital, leverage and skill to steer the country from this political crisis.

Washington's failure to honour its role in implementing the political agreement and its preoccupation with its own presidential elections have weakened its hand in facilitating an acceptable resolution.

The UN and other international organisations also lack the means, independence and authority to broker a new agreement. Existing actors and stakeholders need to be reinforced by new

stakeholders. The UN's role needs to be significantly enhanced, particularly in monitoring and managing the forthcoming elections.

However, to ensure the UN's neutrality and effectiveness, there is a need for a group of international wise men and women who can help facilitate and mediate contested political issues among Afghan elites.

Gloomy warnings

Foreign invasion /interference and inter-elite competition over power, identity and ideology have been Afghanistan's two principal curses and drivers of its four-decade-old hybrid conflict.

If the gloomy warnings prove correct, the country risks a return to intra-factional war or entering new territory: the de facto partitioning of the country.

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Unfortunately, there are reasons to fear both eventualities. There are already other precedents around the world that should awaken the complacent Afghans, such as the partition of Pakistan and emergence of Bangladesh following a contested election in 1970s.

For the first time, there are signs of separatist sentiments among non-Pashtuns. Although they remain small and isolated, a deepening political crisis could prove to be fertile ground for such sentiments to grow, with external powers ready and willing to assist.

Pakistan's continued support to the Taliban manifests its decades-old strategy of seeking strategic depth in Afghanistan. Both managed instability and/or a de-facto partitioning of the country are preferable to Pakistan than a united, prosperous and independent Afghanistan.

Taliban's terror infrastructure, Kabul's bickering elites, and Washington's double-think approach will be instrumental to Pakistan's objectives.

Unlike the divided Afghan elites, there is an abundance of sane and responsible voices among ordinary Afghans. The endorsement of the US-Afghanistan Bilateral Security Agreement by a consultative Loya Jirga, massive participation in national elections and an overwhelming support to the current constitutional order show the desire and determination of Afghans to have a functioning democratic constitutional order.

The challenge for Afghanistan is to align the priorities of the Afghan elites and external powers with the Afghan people's aspiration for peace, democracy and an inclusive political order.

Kaynak/Source: