
AFGHANISTAN: HEZB-I-ISLAMI ARMED GROUP SIGNS PEACE DEAL

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Afghanistan has signed a peace agreement with Hezb-i-Islami, paving the way for the armed group's commander, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, to make a political comeback despite allegations of war crimes during the 1990s.

Government officials praised Thursday's agreement in the capital Kabul as a step towards peace, while critics said it opened the door to one of the most infamous figures in Afghanistan's civil war to play a role in the country's already divisive politics.

"I hope that this is the beginning of a permanent peace in our country," said Sayed Ahmad Gilani, head of the government's High Peace Council and one of the signatories of the agreement, according to Reuters news agency.

The deal with the largely dormant Hezb-i-Islami marks a symbolic victory for President Ashraf Ghani who has struggled to revive peace talks with the more powerful Taliban fighters while, at the same time, attempting to reintegrate other controversial military figures into society by granting immunity for past crimes.

The government also agreed to press for the lifting of international sanctions on Hekmatyar, who was designated a "global terrorist" by the US for his suspected ties to al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

Once branded the "butcher of Kabul", Hekmatyar was a prominent anti-Soviet commander in the 1980s who stands accused of killing thousands of people when his fighters fired on civilian areas of the capital city during the 1992-1996 civil war.

Neither Hekmatyar nor Ghani were present at the signing ceremony on Thursday.

Al Jazeera's Jennifer Glasse, reporting from Kabul, said the government hopes the peace deal "paves the way for future peace with the Taliban".

"That it will be a template for future peace with the Taliban. Afghans will be watching very closely in the coming weeks and months how this deal is implemented," Glasse said.

File photo: Gulbeddin Hekmatyar. [Reuters]

"This is not just a peace deal between Hezb-i-Islami and the government of Afghanistan," Mohammad Amin Karim, head of the group's delegation, said at the ceremony.

"It is a beginning of a new era of peace all around the country," he said, according to the AFP news agency.

The agreement will come into force when it is formally signed by Ghani and Hekmatyar, the government said, though no date has been set.

The current security situation in Afghanistan is unlikely to see much change as a result of the deal, said Timor Sharan, a Kabul-based analyst for the International Crisis Group.

"The deal will have little impact on the dynamics of conflict," Sharan told Reuters.

"The government's rationale is that by luring Hekmatyar on board, other insurgent groups might be encouraged to consider peace too."

Kaynak/Source: