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Report

Deep Differences over Reconciliation Process in Afghanistan

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Reconciliation in Afghanistan

Agreement "Sparks Deep Differences"



Road Paved to First "Collective" Step

Impediments to Agreement Process

- 1 Disappearance and prosecution of Taliban leaders, many of whom are secretly living in neighboring countries
- 2 Inclusion of decision-makers from the movement which are on terror lists without any confidence or guarantees
- 3 Deep-seated heritage of revenge tactics

Taliban Stance on Agreement

- Movement recognizes individual orientations to review internal stances
- Stipulates international or local intermediary during reconciliation
- Some leaders speak of return as political party after reconciliation

Anti-Taliban Group

Believes Taliban dose not have civilized outlook and thus does not have right to deliberation unless strict conditions are imposed

The Actors



America

- Security pact with Afghanistan
- View Taliban as impediment to agreement



Pakistan

- Stipulates return of American support
- Prefers KSA role to Turkish role
- Concerned about growing Indian role in Afghanistan



KSA

- Historic ties with Taliban movement
- Plans for Taliban office in KSA

Highlighted Achievements

After decades, the Afghan people and all other actors admit weapons are not the solution; agree focus must now be peace, justice and social welfare

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Abstract

While reconciliation in Afghanistan appears to be an internal affair, it is influenced by external mediation efforts as well as political competition between several countries. Within the country, opposing political forces hold some compatible viewpoints, but differ greatly on others – for example, there is no uniform stance on dealing with the Taliban, nor is there consensus on the nature of dialogue with the movement. Some go so far as to argue that there is “nothing going on in Afghanistan that could be called reconciliation,” describing what has happened so far as “a round of negotiations between the Taliban and the US.” Compiled from results of a field study by the author, this report analyses what has already been achieved in this process, describes positions of several actors in the Afghan landscape, discusses how each party assesses progress and examines obstacles that hamper reconciliation efforts. The report concludes that the ground has been set for dialogue in pursuit of reconciliation but that the next step depends on the collective action of all stakeholders, internal and external, particularly the US and Pakistan.

Introduction

With war waging in Afghanistan, it is incumbent to question how far reconciliation in the country has progressed and whether or not such efforts can succeed in light of decades of war. Reconciliation may be a prerequisite to the country's stability; however, like any conflict-ridden society, there are multiple approaches to framing the process. With the possibility of another civil war and several challenges which threaten progress, there is no doubt 2014 will be a crucial year for the country. Within the country, each political force holds some positions on the reconciliation process that are compatible with those of its opponents, but differs greatly with them on other matters. Compiled from results of a field study by the author, this report analyses what has already been achieved in this process, describes positions of several actors in the Afghan landscape, discusses how each party assesses progress and examines obstacles that hamper reconciliation efforts.

Most stakeholders agree with Masoom Stanekzai, Secretary General of the High Peace Council in Afghanistan, that reconciliation is a complex, multi-faceted issue with both internal and external dimensions. This necessitates open and honest dialogue that will have a lasting impact, something which also necessitates large amounts of time as each party's demands are identified. Several parties to the conflict have simply not been afforded the right to clearly present their demands, with their points of view restricted to talks behind closed doors.(1)

Stanekzai identified five key problems hampering reconciliation efforts during an interview with the author in Kabul:

1. Disappearance and prosecution of Taliban leaders, making it impossible for them to appear in public to represent the movement's demands;
2. Many Taliban leaders secretly live in neighbouring countries and thus cannot easily appear in public or travel;
3. Influential Taliban decision-makers have been placed on UN terrorism watch lists;
4. The Taliban has no known address;
5. No confidence or guarantees to Taliban leaders by the Afghan government or international forces. There is always a chance that any agreements will be reneged after they appear publicly.

These five problems have created a serious interruption in the process.(2)

Differing opinions

All the stakeholders may desire reconciliation, but differing opinions on the process impede progress. "All live a legacy of a decades-old war, with each fighting cycle adding a new episode deepening divisions and discord among members of society – " each political regime that rose to power took care to leave its own legacy of killing and exclusion of opponents, something that remains fresh in the minds of the Afghan people.(3) The presence of international forces also meant that anything related to the Taliban was repressed, creating further societal isolation and making reconciliation even more difficult.(4)

At the centre of issues which create differing opinions is the dilemma related to the Taliban and the lack of a uniform stance in dealing with the movement – some measures have been taken to attempt to address it, such as opening an office for the movement in Doha, solving the issue of travel for the movement's leaders and a concession that dialogue should benefit all parties rather than serving the interests of some over others. However, there has remained a lack of commitment by all parties in such a manner that prevented the timely start of dialogue. Some actors have gone so far as to argue that there is no reconciliation in Afghanistan, describing it thus far as a "round of negotiations between the Taliban and the US." (5)

Such critics do not outright reject dialogue with the Taliban, but they argue that flexibility with the Taliban is wrong given that the movement is opposed in principle to the democratic process, particularly in its capacity as an armed movement that wants to sustain the conflict. Any reconciliation efforts could very well be fatal to the Taliban, because Afghan people, especially those in cities, are opposed to their ideology. "People are weary of war, while the movement seeks to continue fighting in Kandahar, Khost and other cities." (6)

Lack of a modern economic vision, views on women, science, modernization and personal liberties all join the list of criticisms against the movement's legitimacy as a party to reconciliation. "Society cannot accept stagnation without publications, education, economic growth or respect for individual freedoms." (7)

Perhaps the most major criticism, one levelled by several political parties and officials, is that the Taliban is the very reason US troops are in Afghanistan to begin with. Yet, even with all of this, critics do not advocate continuation of war with the movement nor do they deny that it has societal following with roots and supporters.

Taliban position

The Taliban has not hidden that there are ongoing reviews within its ranks, but they are mainly at the individual level – some members of the group have begun to adopt new ideas, while others have quit the movement altogether. In the comparative sense, reviews within the Afghan Taliban are not the same as those jihadist groups in other parts of the Islamic world have experienced. For example, jihadists in Egypt are quite different – societal structure and education levels differ between the two states. A difference even exists between Pakistani and Afghan Taliban – in the latter, when changes are discussed within, there are noteworthy developments, especially when it comes to the use of media and communications technology. Use of the Internet and web-based technology is one kind of change which has begun with individuals within and will undoubtedly evolve to involve the entire community, causing people to compare the Afghan movement with those in other places. (8)

Grassroots support for the Taliban exists particularly in rural areas of the country, where people have provided support and protection for the movement's fighters. The Taliban has frequently alluded to the Western occupation of Afghanistan and its impact on the beliefs and values of society by paving the way for "bad people" to assume posts within the ruling establishment and creating a gap between the people and their government.

Taliban leaders are talking about the possible return of the Taliban to the political arena, as individuals or political parties, pending reconciliation achievements. For them, true reconciliation has not yet begun, and while they speak about national consensus as a necessity, the movement says practical measures to achieve this do not exist as a result of these factors: (9)

- While the Afghan government wants dialogue and reconciliation to be confined only to Kabul authorities and the Taliban, the movement believes the process must be both internal and external.
- There is no intermediary to moderate reconciliation – for the Taliban, this could be a collection of figures, a state or even an international organization like the United Nations. However, the movement prefers an Afghan intermediary with guarantees in place before the process begins.
- Meetings between the Taliban and US parties did not elevate to the level of negotiations, even though the Doha office was meant to facilitate negotiations. That outlet, however, was shut down as a result of deep differences between the movement and Kabul on the role of religion in governance.

Regional roles

According to political circles in Kabul, both Pakistan and Saudi are likely to play a role in the reconciliation process. Pakistan is concerned about growing Indian influence in the country, while Saudi is adamant that the Taliban unequivocally declare dissociation from al-Qaeda if it wishes to maintain Saudi support. The US places great hope in Pakistan's efforts and its historical position that could convince the movement to enter peace negotiations which will last beyond 2014, particularly given Pakistan's early and practical efforts to achieve this goal.(10)

Pakistan has set the following four conditions in order to restore stability in Afghanistan:(11)

- End Indian influence in Afghanistan.
- Appoint Islamic Party members to key government posts.
- Handover of Pakistani Taliban leaders in Afghanistan to the Pakistani government.
- Handover of Baloch insurgency leaders.

If Pakistan does not have a clear role in the reconciliation process, the negotiations will come to a halt and the entire region's security will be threatened. Afghan army commander General Sher Karimi has highlighted the important role of neighbouring countries and world powers in the reconciliation process, saying that all relevant parties should realize "peace in Afghanistan will impact the entire world and that reconciliation and stability are the path to countering terrorism."(12)

Achievements thus far

Despite challenges and complexity, the reconciliation process has at least instilled the necessity of such a process in the collective mind of the Afghan community. It is quite an achievement that a society subjected years of war and violence now acknowledges that war is not the path to a solution.

Consensus is a ways off, particularly given that the last two generations were born into war and grew old in violence. Stanekzai indicated in his interview that part of the continuing path to success will be the role of religious symbols and leaders in the region who must change the perception of Islam as a violent faith by disseminating the principles of Islam which call for reconciliation, justice and equality.(13)

Conclusion

The conclusion to this report includes a number of feasible action items for internal and external parties involved in the process, as well as five challenges which remain even given positive achievements thus far. Afghan political forces, the general Afghan

public,⁽¹⁴⁾ and external parties such as the United States and Pakistan will all play a role in serving reconciliation. The Afghan public's role in particular will depend on several factors:

- **Rule of Law**

- Citizens should be able to resort to the law for adjudication of disputes and the law should be able to keep up with the needs of the people as well as guarantee equality for all community members, regardless of societal status.

- **Social Justice**

- Protection of the rights of individuals, families and ethnic groups.

- **End of Two-Pronged State**

- Internal tyranny and foreign domination which have cast heavy shadows over the country need to be lifted in order to open the door for effective participation in public affairs by qualified citizens.

- **Leadership**

- The country needs dedicated, zealous leaders who take it upon themselves to respond to the needs of the people, end discrimination and restore justice.

- **Information**

- Transparency and access to information are important to keep citizens and external players aware of developments and provide factual accounts of the situation.

The following challenges remain in the reconciliation process:

- Absence of laws which incorporate universal checks and balances for justice while simultaneously meeting Afghanistan's constitutional requirements.
- Absence of even-handed law enforcement, resulting in injustice toward vulnerable groups in society.
- Lack of awareness about current events in the country and its connection to international developments.
- Internal tyranny and external interference enhanced by the absence of a framework for effective public participation in public affairs.
- Preference of personal, familial and tribal gains over national strategic interests.

To conclude, reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan require genuine partnership between various segments of society, especially national leaders, elites and party leaders.

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Endnotes

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