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THE TALIBAN AND THE 2014 ELECTIONS IN AFGHANISTAN

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report examines the current debate within the Taliban movement about how to approach the 2014 national elections in Afghanistan. It charts the position of the various groupings within the Taliban and how they have interacted both with each other and with interlocutors outside the Taliban. This study, funded by the United States Institute of Peace, draws on extensive interviews conducted in Afghanistan in the spring of 2013 with various Taliban leaders, cadres, commanders, fighters, and community elders.

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Cover photo: Tooryalai Weesa, governor of Kandahar province, voting in Kandahar City, Afghanistan, supplied by DVIDS

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[All Taliban interviewed were in principle committed to a violent campaign to prevent or disrupt the 2014 elections. ... Their degree of practical involvement varied widely.]

Summary

- The Taliban are organized in a number of semiautonomous networks and centers of power, each able to contribute to the formulation of policy and sometimes even able to formulate policy autonomously. This presents challenges in determining exactly what approach the Taliban will take toward the 2014 national elections.
- The Taliban have tried to disrupt previous elections, but they had little capacity to do so in 2004 and 2005. In 2009 and 2010, they had a greater disruptive effect on the electoral process as a whole, though in a handful of cases they did reach deals with individual candidates and local communities.
- For the first time, certain segments of the Taliban have begun to consider alternatives to a campaign of violent disruption of national elections and have even invested considerable effort in making alternatives viable from an organizational point of view.
- Some “militarist” components of the Taliban, primarily the networks or alliances of networks led by the Haqqanis and by Abdul Qayum Zakir, continue to oppose the very idea of elections and always favor a campaign of violent disruption.
- Among those Taliban more inclined to consider alternative approaches, different positions have emerged between the Peshawar Shura and an alliance of networks based in Quetta led by Akhtar Mansur.
- By the end of the summer of 2013, all Taliban groupings had unified behind a common strategy of disrupting the elections, whether for ideological reasons or as a way to increase leverage vis-à-vis their interlocutors in Kabul.
- There does not appear to have been much of a theoretical debate within the Taliban about the admissibility of elections. Instead, the elections of 2014 have been seen as a tactical opportunity to strengthen the image of the Taliban as a political organization, as opposed to a purely military organization.

Introduction

The international community and Afghan political leaders alike see the 2014 Afghan national elections as crucial for the continuation of political stability in Afghanistan and for the success of the past decade's statebuilding effort there. A major factor in determining the success or failure of these elections will be how the Taliban approach them, now that it is clear that the insurgent group has not been brought to the edge of defeat by the 2010–11 surge in the south. In a sense, by stressing the importance of the elections and by committing itself to support them, the international community has locked itself into a conundrum.

There are many problems associated with the electoral process. First, the security conditions might not be in place to carry out the elections in much of the country and particularly in Pashtun areas. Second, even if security conditions are sufficiently permissive, the elections might still be affected by fraud and malpractice—whether similar to or worse than that which occurred in the 2009 elections—and could cause a major crisis inside the current ruling coalition. Third, electoral competition between different factions and groups could increase tension among government partners and different communities. At a time when Western influence is already significantly reduced, such a development would have negative implications for the stability of the country.

Divining the internal workings of the Taliban is a delicate process. The methodology of this study relies heavily on interviews. Two upper-level Taliban leaders, thirty-seven Taliban provincial and district cadres (a mix of military commissioners, members of the Taliban's election disruption commission, network representatives, and a few group commanders), fourteen Taliban fighters, and twenty-six community elders were interviewed specifically for this project between the end of March and the first half of May 2013.¹

The interviews were carried out by experienced Afghan interviewers with a long track record of reaching out to insurgents. The interviewees had to be kept anonymous for their own security and the security of the interviewers. The questionnaires were structured, but follow-up questions were allowed and encouraged. Twenty-five elders were interviewed from the selected districts in order to triangulate as much as possible the information provided by Taliban members about policy and practices.

Community elders are likely to hold only superficial information about the Taliban's internal debates, but they are often witness to their actions. In order to cross-check the information given by the Taliban interviewees, all of the Taliban were interviewed separately. Further, contact with them was made through different channels to ensure a balance among Taliban networks. Given the difficulty of fully triangulating and confirming information, however, this methodology cannot guarantee that what is described in this report is representative of all the different components of the Taliban in a completely balanced way.

One issue faced when compiling this report was how to turn the terminology used by Afghan interlocutors into something coherent and widely understandable. Taliban and elders, for example, often referred in the interviews to "Afghan Taliban" and "Pakistani Taliban" or "Taliban who come from Pakistan." This usage has nothing to do with those organizations typically referred to as "Pakistani Taliban," which primarily conduct antigovernment operations inside Pakistan. Rather, this terminology reflects degrees of dependence on Pakistan among Taliban factions. For example, to local Afghan Taliban fronts, the "Pakistani Taliban" might be Afghan members of the Taliban whom they judge to be on the payroll of foreign spy agencies or who spend the majority of their time inside Pakistan. In other instances, they might use this terminology simply to discredit rivals within the Taliban movement. To the elders, all Taliban who operate from Pakistan are "Pakistani Taliban." This terminology is of course confusing and so is not extensively used in the report, though it inevitably appears in some of the quotes.

An Overview of the Taliban's Internal Alignments

In Taliban terminology, *shuras* (councils) are essentially representative organs that bring together power and interest groups within the Taliban.² There are two main centers of power within the Taliban, the shuras of Quetta and Peshawar.³ Both the Quetta and Peshawar shuras include various networks gathered around charismatic warrior mullahs. In Quetta, the networks are formally recognized by the Taliban military leadership and have a role in the decision-making process. In Peshawar, the networks have been formally abolished and their structures merged.

A key factor in this formal merger has been the centralization of revenue in the hands of the Peshawar Shura's top leadership, who are reportedly directly supported by Pakistani authorities.⁴ The centralization of resources has resulted in greater unity, even if Peshawar still consists of smaller component shuras (e.g., Shamsatoo, Tore Pagri, Ijraya). The notable exception is the Miran Shah Shura (better known as the Haqqani Network), which—by virtue of its military power, own sources of funding, and territorial concentration—has been able to negotiate more favorable terms with Peshawar and maintains a greater degree of operational autonomy, though it rarely claims any political autonomy.

At the time this report was written (June 2013), interviews carried out for this and other research projects described the Taliban as divided into four groups. The Peshawar Shura, as has already been discussed, remains substantially united, while the Quetta Shura was de facto split into the following three groups:

- Akhtar Mansur's alliance, which includes Mansur's own large network and the powerful Baradar and Dadullah networks;
- Abdul Qayum Zakir's alliance, which includes Zakir's own large network and those of Sattar, Janan, Naim, and Ibrahim; and
- the Rahbari Shura (Leadership Council) in Quetta, which was once the main decision-making body of the Taliban—and for a period aligned with Mansur—but is now increasingly trying to play an autonomous role. The Rahbari Shura includes a number of old political leaders who individually have a modest following among the rank and file but who collectively are not a negligible force.

The two strongest Quetta factions—Mansur's and Zakir's—have separate sources of revenue, a fact that partly explains their split. Zakir has been supported by Pakistani authorities and by the Peshawar Shura, while Mansur has been reliant on his own fundraising inside Afghanistan and among the Afghan diaspora. Beyond the issue of funds, the main factor uniting the various networks (including Baradar's and Dadullah's) inside the Mansur Alliance is opposition to Abdul Qayum Zakir, the Taliban's rising star, who has been accumulating power since his appointment as head of the Quetta Military Commission in 2009.⁵ Though Mansur's faction was formerly aligned with the Rahbari Shura, neither his nor Zakir's faction is strictly aligned with the Rahbari Shura, which has seen a decline in influence (and funds) over the years.

When analyzing the Taliban's internal politics, it is important to keep in mind the fluidity of alliances, particularly within and between Zakir and Mansur's extended networks. For instance, during the research phase of this project in the spring of 2013, news came that Mullah Naim had split from Mansur's alliance and allied with Zakir. In autumn 2012, the network of Dadullah had realigned from Zakir to Mansur.⁶

The political and military strengths of these alliances vary greatly. As of spring 2013, Mansur's alliance and the Rahbari Shura likely did not account for more than a quarter of Taliban fighters. However, they wielded considerable influence among Pashtun communities, mainly in

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southern Afghanistan, because their leaders were seasoned political figures able to talk to community leaders. Zakir's alliance and the Peshawar Shura, while accounting together for perhaps as many as three-quarters of Taliban fighters, were not as well connected with communities because of their extensive military background and focus.⁸

These differences in strength contributed to the creation of diverging interests with regard to the desirability of a political settlement of the conflict. The component that was strongest militarily (Zakir) believed Western disengagement from Afghanistan after 2014 would maximize its leverage and thus saw no reason to rush into negotiations, while the component that was weakest militarily (Mansur) saw the advantage of pushing for negotiations as soon as possible. In other words, the attitudes toward a political settlement for some Taliban leaders had as much to do with balances of power within the movement as it did with the relationship between the movement as a whole and the Kabul government that it was contesting.

The large majority of the Taliban, however, remained committed to the unity of the movement, a factor that has a major impact on limiting how far they are willing to go in pursuing their own private interests.⁹

The Taliban's Past Record with Elections

In order to understand the internal Taliban debates over the 2014 elections, it is necessary first to look at how the Taliban have historically related to electoral processes, both as an Islamic Emirate and as an insurgent movement, and how they have communicated their message on elections to the public.

No elections were held during the Taliban Emirate (1994–2001), nor was there ever any real debate on the possibility of holding elections during this time or the need for them. Although a few interviewees put this down to the difficult environment (the Taliban was never able to gain full control of the country), the majority indicated that there was no need for elections within the emirate system of governance, built as it was around processes of consensual selection of leaders by a small group of men who considered themselves to be uniquely competent to act in accordance with what the Quran demanded. Others cited the lack of strong electoral traditions in Afghanistan and the deep rural and religious conservatism of the Taliban as structural factors that made elections a nonissue during this time.

So, when the post-2001 electoral cycle started in 2004, the Taliban were, at first, without a definite position on an issue they had never fully considered. As such, their approach was largely reactive. If the elections were of great importance to the international community, the Taliban's interest in them was largely a negative reflection of this foreign importance. Because Washington and other Western capitals had identified elections as important benchmarks of progress and success in Afghanistan, the Taliban saw them as necessary and convenient targets: very visible but vulnerable and soft at the same time. Even when the Taliban have lacked the operational capacity to significantly disrupt the elections (particularly during the 2004 presidential and 2005 parliamentary elections), they have regularly issued hostile statements to the press and threatened candidates and voters alike with death for the act of participating.

It is difficult to say with certainty how the Taliban would have approached elections if the international community had not placed such an emphasis on them. What emerges from the interviews for this report is that the Taliban seem to have regarded the elections with an attitude of indifference.

When asked what was wrong with the elections, many Taliban cadres answered that foreign support and interference was the main issue. The Quetta-based Taliban political leadership has also publicly stated the same about the 2014 elections. Most recently, in an August 2013 Eid

Differences in strength contributed to the creation of diverging interests with regard to the desirability of a political settlement.

message, a statement under the name of Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar attacks the elections not because they are un-Islamic or fraudulent but essentially because they are not Afghan enough: “Our pious and mujahid people know that selection, de facto, takes place in Washington.”¹⁰

These messages, however, are mostly posted online and meant for national and international audiences, not necessarily for local communities or even rank-and-file fighters. Even in areas in which the Taliban have a strong presence, elders were not especially knowledgeable about Taliban positions or policies in regards to political matters. There is, however, overlap between Taliban and community elders’ viewpoints on elections, particularly in conservative parts of the country in which both the Taliban and some elders believe, for instance, that women should not have the right to vote.

Although Taliban teams are known to regularly visit villages and meet the local elders, this effort does not seem to be the main mode of Taliban political communication. Instead, the elders indicated how they believed that the Taliban often identified sympathetic mullahs in local mosques to express the Taliban’s line. At least as far as the villagers are concerned, other means of communication are of little relevance—websites are addressed to the mass media and donors/fundraisers, while DVDs and CDs are targeted at recruitment and indoctrination. The content of such media can be very different from what the Taliban want to communicate to the rural population.

The 2004 Elections

The Taliban insurgency was still at an early stage in 2004, with only a couple of provinces, such as Zabul and Paktika, being seriously affected. The Taliban’s operational capacity to actually attack and intimidate voters was limited to these provinces and a few other districts, mainly in Ghazni and northern Helmand. One Taliban leader, a member of the Peshawar Shura, acknowledged that the insurgency was not being supported by neighboring countries and lacked the resources for a widespread campaign in 2004:

In that time no one wanted to make problems for elections. Pakistan did not want to disrupt the elections. We said, “Let’s see how much elections are beneficial for Afghanistan. People must not think that this was the first election and Taliban did not let it happen.”

The reference to Pakistan seems to indicate that the modest resources available at that time might have been a key factor in discouraging the Taliban from disrupting the elections, as opposed to Taliban open-mindedness as suggested in the quote. At the time, there were reports of tensions at the top of the Taliban over the failure to sabotage the elections.¹¹ In addition, Pakistan might have had an important or decisive influence over that Taliban’s attitude. U.S. president George W. Bush reportedly warned Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf that he needed orderly elections in Afghanistan, and Musharraf complied by restricting movement across its border.¹² The elders in Badghis and Helmand said that in 2004 the Taliban could only carry out propaganda against the elections in the mosques and through sympathetic mullahs. The exception was Musa Qala, where some violence occurred. In Ghazni, the Taliban urged villagers not to vote; they distributed “night letters” warning people not to vote, but these admittedly had little effect. In some cases, small-scale retaliation occurred after the elections.

The 2005 Elections

The insurgency started gaining momentum in 2005 and began to carry out attacks on a more significant scale. According to unverified data cited by a Taliban leader, 38 entire districts and

560 villages in other districts were prevented from voting in the parliamentary elections of that year (about 10 percent of the countryside). This leader also reported that a foreign sponsor paid large amounts of cash to the Taliban in 2005 to distribute to people and commanders in order to stop the parliamentary elections. The Taliban's opposition to the elections was, at least in principle, total. In 2005, there was no reported case of the Taliban supporting any parliamentary candidate. This is contrary to what was reported in later elections (see below).

However, even with a large infusion of external funding and greater Taliban reach, the impact of the 2005 disruption campaign when compared to 2004 was modest. Elders interviewed for this report confirmed that in 2005 the Taliban were more active but with limited effect. All of them stated that their individual districts had been affected (even in the north), but most of the anti-election activities consisted of allegedly pro-Taliban mullahs preaching in mosques against the elections and in the distribution of threatening night letters.

Some violence was confirmed to have occurred in Helmand. In some cases, such as in Sayed Abad district (Wardak), the Taliban punished some villagers after the vote for having participated, but only a single village was fully prevented from voting. In Ghazni province, a candidate was killed before the elections, and two voters were executed after the elections. Even in a Taliban stronghold like Daychopan district of Zabul, the Taliban did not carry out any violence against the electoral process, although they did carry out propaganda against it and in particular against candidates who were not considered "good" Muslims. In Reg, one of the most remote districts of Kandahar, only six of eighty-five villages were not able to vote.

While the Taliban insurgency was stronger in 2005 than in 2004, it still lacked the widespread military power and coordination to cause large-scale disruption. Had the elections been held just a year later, when the Taliban really began to expand operationally, they may have made a more concerted attempt at disruption. However, in 2005, as one Taliban commander noted when talking specifically of Ghazni province, the insurgency was too busy organizing itself and managing its own expansion and thus did not prioritize election disruption.

The 2009 Elections

By 2009 the Taliban was well organized, resourced, and able to exert considerable control over sections of the population, particularly in the south and east. As such, the 2009 Taliban campaign against elections was different in both scale and style from 2005. More moderate persuasion, which characterized most of the Taliban's effort in 2005, gave way to active intimidation and coercion. One month before the elections, "election commissioners" were appointed by Quetta to coordinate anti-election activities in the provinces. One Taliban leader claimed that the Taliban received money from progovernment sources to allow the elections to occur but that these sources were essentially outbid by external sponsors who offered more funding to disrupt the elections. The number of foreign countries reportedly supporting the Taliban's campaign against the elections increased in 2009 to include several Arab Gulf countries.

One Taliban leader claimed the insurgency prevented the 2009 elections from being held in sixty districts as well as many villages in other districts, mostly in the south, and that a total of four hundred electoral staff were killed and ten trucks with ballots were captured. Other Taliban cadres claimed that more than three hundred polling stations were attacked and ninety were shut down countrywide.

In Helmand, 120 attacks were carried out against the electoral process. Eighty people were killed and twenty people had their fingers cut off in retaliation for voting, according to a cadre who operated there at the time. A commander claimed to have personally carried out twenty-

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nine attacks against polling stations in Nad Ali and Marjah. In Kandahar alone, thirty elders and sixty election staffers were killed, according to one Talib's account. In Nerkh (Wardak), two residents were killed for voting, according to residents.

In many districts, elections could be held only in the more accessible villages. In Khakrez (Kandahar), only 30 out of 105 villages were able to access polling sites, according to the Taliban. A similar inability to vote was reported in other Kandahari districts, such as Shah Wali Kot, Maruf, Panjwai, and Spin Boldak. Elders who were interviewed confirmed at least some of these Taliban claims of declining rural participation and highlighted the case of Musa Qala (Helmand), where no voting occurred in 2009. In Reg, twenty of eighty-five villages were unable to vote in 2009, up from only six that had been disenfranchised in 2005. In areas with less of a Taliban presence, violence was more contained, but here, too, a number of villages could not vote: In Dawlatabad (Balkh), for example, the Taliban successfully kept villages from voting.

Considering that the Independent Election Commission (IEC) reported that seven hundred polling stations stayed closed on Election Day because of security issues, Taliban claims about the number of polling stations closed down do not seem inflated. The veracity of the rest of the data appears dubious, however. According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, a total of twenty IEC officials were killed, a far cry from the four hundred claimed by the Taliban. Another twenty-two civilians were killed, some of whom were campaign staff of presidential candidates. But even if the Taliban had included them in the count, the gap between the two sets of data would remain huge.¹³

Despite the Taliban's exaggerations, elders in general agreed that violence was much worse in 2009 than in 2005, and in many districts, people were hurt for the first time as a consequence of their desire to vote. However, the 2009 campaign was still mostly focused on intimidation: For example, in Shirzad (Nangarhar), the Taliban ran a night letters campaign to intimidate elders.

The actual impact of the Taliban's campaign should not be overestimated. In many areas, the main concern in 2009 was abuse and coercion by local strongmen acting often on behalf of certain candidates rather than the Taliban, even in much of the Pashtun belt. A Mohmand Dara (Nangarhar) elder recalled the rigging and manipulation of the vote, as local strongmen were selling their services to the different candidates.

In 2009, the Taliban were still largely disinclined to make any compromise with regard to the elections. As one cadre, an election commissioner in Nangarhar province, pointed out:

In 2009 there was one candidate with a Talib past, whose name was Salam Roketi, but we did not support him and we even showed opposition to him.

Compared with 2005, however, there was greater willingness to shelve principles when tactically convenient. In Mohmand Dara, for instance, the Taliban stopped their anti-election campaigns after the first round out of fear of favoring Abdullah Abdullah's victory—the possibility of a “Tajik” head of state was seen as more of a threat than the elections themselves by the predominately Pashtun Taliban.¹⁴

A new development in 2009 was that the Karzai government, worried that the Taliban campaign to disrupt the elections would prevent Pashtuns from voting and thus hurt the incumbent, actively invited elders to approach the local Taliban and convince them to let people vote. The predominant view among the twenty-six elders interviewed was that their efforts to dissuade the Taliban in 2009 were not only fruitless but also risky and counterproductive (see table 1).

One Taliban fighter confirmed that in his area the elders were trying to contact the Taliban and that only out of consideration for the elders' influence no violent retaliation took place against them. It would appear that the elders were quite cautious in their approaches, often only

Table 1: Results of Elders’ Attempt to Lobby the Taliban (in Percentages)

Taliban did not listen.	54
Elder refused to talk to Taliban out of fear.	15
Elder refused out of sympathy with Taliban.	4
Taliban reacted with campaign of assassinations.	12
Elder was arrested.	4
Sometimes Taliban agreed.	15
Elder did not try to lobby.	4
Elder tried and Taliban asked for money.	4

Note: Multiple answers were allowed.

pretending to ask for clarifications over the Taliban’s position. Some Taliban cadres adamantly denied having received requests from the elders and showed their irritation toward people who were less than committed to the jihad effort. As a representative of Janan’s network in Wardak province stated,

Do you think it is possible that elders who are living under our control would come and ask us to allow the Karzai elections? We are fighting and doing jihad to overthrow this government and bring over an Islamic government. We have lost our friends and muja-hideen for this cause and then elders would come and ask us to allow the Karzai govern-ment election. The elders know that we hate these kinds of requests.

The willingness of the elders to approach the Taliban appears to have varied from place to place. An interviewee from Shirzad (Nangarhar) said elders in his district were divided between those who sided with the Taliban’s anti-election position and those who believed the vote should be allowed. In general, though, few of the elders interviewed had much sympathy for the Taliban in 2009 and 2010; those who refused to lobby the Taliban were likely to have been motivated mainly by fear over insurgent reactions rather than any affinity for the Taliban position. Today, only one of twenty-six elders surveyed for this report agreed with the Taliban’s stance on the elections.¹⁵

As the elders’ willingness varied, so too did their ability to exercise some influence. Although information in this regard was scant, it would appear that local Taliban, operating among their communities of origin, might have been more susceptible to elder influence. Some of the Tali-ban interviewed admitted that in some instances elders might have been able to influence in-surgent actions. One fighter from Mansur’s network admitted that his group was contacted by elders in the past and collaborated with them secretly.

The 2010 Elections

During the 2010 parliamentary elections, the level of Taliban violence was comparable to 2009. The significant difference was that the Taliban allowed elections in certain areas and supported some candidates, allegedly at the direction of external sponsors.

The most widely quoted case of Taliban supporting a candidate was in northern Helmand, where the brother of a prominent politician reportedly negotiated with some of the Taliban networks in Kajaki and Musa Qala districts to allow the vote to take place—whether the vote was fair or fixed (as widely reported) is not clear. External Taliban leadership reportedly autho-rized this deal. An elder in Daychopan (Zabul) reported that some Taliban were pushing for a

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particular candidate while others were trying to sabotage the elections altogether—suggesting some local disunity and, in this case, the noninvolvement of top leadership.¹⁶

In some areas, the support of the Taliban appears to have been on a commercial basis. In Mohammad Agha and Baraki Barak (Logar), elders believe that some candidates made payments to some of the Taliban in exchange for being allowed to campaign, but this does not appear to have been a policy authorized by the Taliban leadership.

With the Taliban allowing elections to occur in some areas, countrywide violence levels may have decreased in 2010 compared to 2009. However, where the campaign against the elections went ahead without compromise, the level of violence and intimidation might in fact have been even higher than in 2009. Interviews with elders seem to indicate exactly this. Elders pointed to a rise in violence in areas like Mohmand Dara (Nangarhar), where five people were executed and others had their fingers cut off, and Maruf (Kandahar), where twenty villagers were killed and a few more had their fingers cut. One elder in the Ajristan district of Ghazni province described the climax of intimidation as follows:

In the beginning the Taliban tried to convince people not to vote and not to participate in the election, but when we reached close to Election Day, the Taliban started threatening the villagers not to vote; otherwise they would kill those who voted.

The level of Taliban control, especially in rural areas, combined with the history of intimidation and punishment resulted in a greater number of villages being unable to vote than in years past. In Reg (Kandahar), the number of villages unable to vote rose to 37 out of 85. In Mohammad Agha (Logar), 20 of 60 villages could not vote. In Sayed Abad (Wardak), 25–30 villages were prevented from voting. In Sangin (Helmand), 76 of 96 villages were effectively disenfranchised as the Taliban intimidated and killed some of those who dared venture to the polling stations. In Nerkh (Wardak), half of the 60 villages could vote. In Ghazni, elders said that few Pashtuns voted, as confirmed by the fact that all of the parliamentary seats in this mixed Hazara-Pashtun province went to Hazaras. In Dand-i Ghorī (Baghlan), one of the areas of the north worst affected by the violence, turnout was estimated at 20 percent by one elder and at almost nil by the Taliban.

The 2010 elections saw the continuation of the attempts by government officials to encourage elders to lobby the Taliban in favor of the electoral process; one elder in Dand-i Ghorī (Baghlan) described the effort this way:

A group of elders in Dand-i-Ghorī following my advice went to [the main district] Taliban commander in 2010. The elders told [him] that we will pay you tax and zakat (alms); we will let you operate in our district but now we don't have anyone on the government side to defend our rights and bring development projects and other help to our district. The elders asked the Taliban to permit villagers to participate in the election and vote for someone from the district. But unfortunately [the Taliban commander] didn't accept the elders' offer and threatened the elders and the villagers that if anyone voted in the election, the Taliban would burn their house and cut their fingers off.

In Moqur (Ghazni), one messenger sent by the elders to ask the Taliban for negotiations was executed on the spot. The Taliban confirmed that they sometimes reacted violently against elders who were advocating in favor of letting people vote, killing a number of elders in 2009–10. In general, it would appear that the Taliban hardened their attitude in 2010 toward elders pleading for the elections to be allowed. A Taliban cadre in Baghlan explained the Taliban's irritation:

I told them that instead of coming and joining us in the jihad, instead of buying weapons for us to continue the jihad against the foreign troops and the Afghan government, you come and ask us to let the elections happen. . . . It was a very funny request. In fact, they all know that we have been fighting against this terrible government for a long time. Lots of our friends were martyred and wounded in this way, but those villagers without thinking, they came and asked us to let the election happen.

General Considerations on 2004–2010

Though the Taliban has, on principle, opposed all four of Afghanistan's national elections, their ability to disrupt these elections has changed throughout the years. In 2004, while there may have been a wait and see attitude, interviews with elders suggest that this was more an issue of ability rather than will, and thus propaganda and intimidation rather than direct violence was the method they were forced to employ.

By 2009 and 2010, the Taliban were better funded and organized and able to openly attack polling sites, candidates, voters, and elections officials. Their claims for 2009 and 2010, however, seem inflated in terms of the damage done. Asked why the level of violence inflicted by the Taliban was somewhat lower than expected on the basis of their military capabilities, all the Taliban interviewees in Afghanistan stated that it was simply a matter of Kabul underreporting the scale of the problem.

Pakistan-based Taliban, on the other hand, pointed to a lack of coordination and planning among leadership and ad hoc implementation at the ground level.

A Peshawar-based interviewee stated that the Quetta Shura wanted to disrupt the elections but that it was not sufficiently organized to achieve its aims. The Quetta interviewee claimed that Taliban leaders authorized local Taliban to tolerate the electoral process in some cases in 2010 but that this was not a Taliban policy and no coherent statements, either publicly or privately to front commanders and shadow governors, were made in this regard. Instead, this authorization of tolerance seems to have been the result of high-level dealings between individual Taliban leaders and particular political elites in Afghanistan with family members running for office or some other personal or economic stake in the elections.

The same ad hoc economic arrangements were at work on a smaller scale at the district level. Where community leaders were able to lobby effectively for Taliban tolerance of electoral processes seems to have been mostly the result of personal connections to local Taliban or cash payments from candidates.

In addition to these internal, interest-based splits on whether to attack the polls, differences also arose in 2009 and 2010 between the Peshawar and Quetta shuras. According to the Peshawar source, in 2009 and 2010, Peshawar was mostly in favor of allowing the elections to take place, with the exception of a key military leader, Dost Mohammed, who insisted he would in any case carry out a campaign against the elections in Kunar and Nuristan. Quetta, by contrast, was unanimously in favor of disrupting the elections, even if it might have turned a blind eye when some leaders cut secret deals.

But it is important not to read too much about the Taliban's views of elections and democracy from Peshawar's tolerant stance. Outside Kunar and Nuristan (Dost Mohammed's strongholds), their military position was rather weak, and a full-fledged campaign against the elections would have exposed this weakness. Today, the Peshawar Shura is stronger, more organized, and, as will be explored in the next section, taking a more activist role in 2014 election disruption than Quetta.

Debate about the 2014 Elections and a Peace Settlement

In the spring and early summer of 2013 when field research was conducted, all Taliban interviewed were in principle committed to a violent campaign to prevent or disrupt the 2014 elections. However, as will be discussed, their degree of practical involvement to achieving this end varied widely.

Though the Taliban has, on principle, opposed all four of Afghanistan's national elections, their ability to disrupt these elections has changed throughout the years.

On the other side, the government of Afghanistan was reportedly approaching elders to lobby local Taliban to allow voting. Among elders there appears to be even less appetite than in 2009 and 2010 to petition the Taliban. This reluctance is due to the mostly ineffectual and dangerous attempts to convince the Taliban in the past. There was no evidence, at least in mid-2013, that the Taliban—Peshawar and Quetta cadres—would be more receptive to local entreaties. A *mahaz* (front) commander for Abdul Qayum Zakir stated openly that elders who insisted on supporting the electoral process could be targeted for killing.

Differences in Planning among Taliban

Zakir's alliance in Quetta was reported to be the component of the Taliban most vehemently opposed to the electoral process even before research for this report began, due to the uncompromising jihadist stance of Zakir himself. As of spring 2013, the position of the Peshawar Shura with regard to the elections coincided with Zakir's.

Peshawar has been leading the formulation of an elections disruption strategy, which was presented to, and accepted by, Zakir. Peshawar and Zakir's position as of spring 2013 was that both peace negotiations and peaceful elections were a nonstarter as long as "foreigners" were in Afghanistan. The line is that a successful electoral process would be seen as America's victory and that elections could be assumed to deliver only what "the Americans want."

This line was communicated to the cadres on the ground and from them transmitted further to the Taliban rank and file and to the general population. Noted one of Zakir's cadres,

The conditions from the Taliban side are obviously that the United States should leave Afghanistan and be ashamed of their act in Afghanistan. They should release the Taliban prisoners. They should recognize the Islamic Emirate internationally and accept their defeat in Afghanistan. They should say, "We are defeated by the Taliban and we don't have the tolerance to fight against the Taliban."

The possibility of political inclusion via the elections meant little because the government was seen as America's puppet and thus inclusion as fundamentally unrealistic. A Peshawar cadre argued that because an American withdrawal would not happen before the elections, he believed the decision to violently sabotage the elections would hold until polling day.

The uncompromising stance on the elections and on negotiations was driven by self-confidence. As an individual close to the Peshwar Shura stated,

We want to take power by force. We are succeeding in our strategies. Americans and their forces are escaping and they are afraid.

A cadre from Wardak shared this view, believing that Peshawar would not negotiate a deal until a complete withdrawal of foreign troops occurs. That is not believed to happen by 2014, but if it did, he says, they would easily win the war, so negotiations would likely not be needed.

Taliban who would like to allow the elections in exchange for concessions were described as opportunistic. As one cadre associated with Zakir stated,

There are some Taliban who think elections are happening anyway, so we must talk with the government and get some money, but we said, "No, this is not true." Taliban must not support the elections and so too the people of Afghanistan and all must leave the ballot boxes empty and no one should participate.

Others stated that those who want to negotiate are not real Taliban. A cadre in a front under the command of Zakir expressed the most extreme view. He stated that he would oppose peace even if Mullah Omar was declaring it and that he would oppose the elections under the current system even if Mullah Omar was a candidate.

Disruption Planning

According to the Peshawar Shura interviewee, an “electoral office” of the Peshawar Shura was established in mid-February 2013. The office, as of April 2013, had seventeen staff members in charge of as many provinces in the east, southeast, northeast, and Kabul regions. The electoral office’s avowed purpose was to prevent the 2014 elections from taking place. Five hundred million Pakistani rupees (\$5 million) had been allocated to create a network of “electoral commissions” inside Afghanistan.

Another source claimed that a massive budget had been assigned to the Peshawar Shura electoral office and that Zakir was expecting his own budget to be assigned soon. Taliban “election commissioners” have reportedly become the second highest-ranking Taliban officials in a district or province after “military commissioners.” Their presence on the ground was confirmed by independent sources. According to a cadre in Peshawar, the rationale for establishing an electoral office in the Peshawar Shura, with a considerable budget, included the need to

1. improve information gathering about the electoral process, the organization presiding over it, and the candidates;
2. improve the discipline of the Taliban in the field in implementing the orders transmitted by the leadership concerning the elections, as in previous years a number of commanders were only pretending to be sabotaging the electoral effort;
3. improve the ability to sabotage the electoral effort through the systematic infiltration of the electoral commission.

In order to turn the hostility to the elections into an effective operational plan, Zakir decided to allow the Peshawar Shura to open electoral offices even in the south. An agreement was reached in spring 2013 between Peshawar and Quetta, according to which the electoral office in Peshawar would open local branches in some of Quetta’s areas too: the north, Zabul, and parts of Ghazni. In the remaining areas, the disruption of the electoral effort would be left to selected Taliban commanders and networks connected to one of Afghanistan’s neighbors. This compromise seemed intended to allow Mansur’s alliance to avowedly stay out of the anti-elections campaign in order not to damage its negotiating efforts with Kabul and foreign diplomats, while at the same time still allowing for substantial sabotage to occur. In practice, it will be difficult to attribute acts of violence to specific Taliban networks.

As spring 2013 approached, according to a cadre in Peshawar, Taliban cadres from the provinces were called back to Pakistan to be briefed about the elections plan:

I think around a month or month and half ago, I was called for a meeting in Pakistan. All the influential figures of the Taliban attended. . . . The agenda was the 2014 elections and how the mujahideen should play a role in the coming election. Our leaders and influential figures told us . . . to prevent and spend all our energy, a week before the election and on the day of election, until we completely prevent 100 percent the elections in our districts and provinces.

By mid-spring the campaign of intimidation was ongoing, and orders had been issued to the field commander. An elder confirmed that elders were clearly told by the Taliban in their areas that the elections would be banned, warning them not to work for the IEC or campaign for any candidate. An elections officer described his resources and tasks in this way:

I got one million dollars budget to prevent the election and talk with the villagers and elders in the districts of the province to which I am assigned. I have forty people under my control, and I distribute three or four people to every district. I also talked with network leaders, military commissioners, village elders, and the tribal shura.

The Taliban election commissioners said that their instructions involved talking to elders and convincing them not to participate in the elections and to burn their cards. They mentioned a plan to inject ten thousand additional fighters in 2014, tasked to disrupt the elections. It is not clear whether these ten thousand would be in addition to the usual spring-summer surge, which sees Taliban numbers easily double in most provinces, or whether it would represent an early spring surge (the elections are scheduled for April 5, 2014). A Taliban logistician in Ghazni stated that he was ordered to stockpile weapons and ammunition for the elections of 2014, with an eye to a major Taliban offensive then.

The Peshawar Shura told the various Taliban networks that if they were found to be tolerating the elections or negotiating with Kabul, they would cut off all funding from Peshawar. In fact, some sources indicated that the Peshawar Shura threatened to attack anybody supporting the elections, including Taliban. By June 2013, there were already some concrete examples of Taliban being punished for unwarranted contacts and agreements. Cadres who talked to Kabul politicians in Wardak and Ghazni were sacked and arrested. The most prominent among them was Abdul Fahim (military commissioner of Wardak), who reportedly made a deal with a Kabul politician to facilitate the elections, but who was then arrested and sacked.

This narrative, however, is not necessarily the whole story. The procedure adopted for buying and registering voter cards is revealing. The Taliban election commissioners in the districts had a budget to buy voter cards from the elders, usually at around \$10 each. The elders would meet the Taliban to offer their stock of cards, which were counted. Copies of the cards were sent to the office back in Peshawar for the records. Once the allocated budget had been spent, the election commissioners would receive an additional allocation of cash to buy more cards.

One interviewee claimed he had \$100,000 to spend and bought ten thousand cards; he was sending the records back to receive more money and buy more cards. What is interesting is that the cards were not immediately taken away from the elders and destroyed but left in their hands. What would be the purpose of doing so, if the option of asking them to vote for somebody was not being still considered? The interviewee insisted that his orders were to prevent the elections, not to favor any particular candidate, but he admitted that if he were ordered to tell the elders to vote for somebody, he would do so. Some Taliban cadres admitted that if they were directed to allow the elections to take place and support a particular candidate, they would follow these orders.

This possibility has to be seen in light of the fact that a Taliban source in Khost (controlled by the Peshawar Shura) mentioned in late 2012 that a debate was going on within the Peshawar Shura leadership on whether to support a candidate in the 2014 elections. At that time, a decision had not been made, but the information suggests that the Peshawar Shura's hard-line opposition to the elections as of June 2013 had not been the only option discussed within the shura.¹⁷

Such ambiguities were not found among Zakir's ranks, however. At their mildest, a few cadres sounded indifferent to the electoral process. A cadre of Zakir in Nangarhar, for example, expressed his readiness to support the electoral process if he was ordered to do so. In general, however, Zakir's cadres were solidly behind the plan to disrupt the elections.

Apart from allowing Peshawar to open its own electoral branches in the south, the only other decision taken by Zakir concerning the elections derived from the joint Zakir-Peshawar assessment of the "inefficiency" of Quetta in preventing the previous elections: Plans were made to rotate Taliban around as much as possible in the run-up to the 2014 election, so that the elders would not be able to influence the local Taliban as they had before. The apparent lack of indoctrination efforts might explain why some of Zakir's cadres on the ground appear to lack clear directions concerning what the right things to say about the elections might be. A representative of Sattar in Ghazni, for example, stated that he had yet to receive instructions concerning 2014,

even if there was an electoral commissioner of the Peshawar Shura in his province lobbying for a campaign against the elections. He expressed his readiness to do whatever his leaders ordered him to do. A member of Zakir's mahaz in Logar also expressed his uncertainty over what the orders concerning the elections would be.

Mansur's Alliance in Quetta and the Rahbari Shura

One Taliban leader claimed that representatives of Mansur met President Hamid Karzai in Qatar at the end of March 2013 and discussed the elections, peace, national unity, and how to resolve the existing problems, but he did not want to confirm whether Mansur himself attended.¹⁸ According to him, Karzai stated that there must be elections in all the Pashtun areas and that is why Karzai needed the support of Mansur's alliance. Mansur's alliance considered on this basis that the best strategy was to talk to Kabul and reach a political deal. The interviewed leader said that some conditions were presented by Mansur's delegation to Karzai, which if accepted would earn Mansur's groups acceptance of the electoral process. Conditions included the release of Taliban prisoners from the Bagram detention facility and Pul-e Charki prison, a number of ministerial posts and ambassadorships, changes in the constitution, and the departure of all foreign forces from Afghan soil, or at least from Kandahar, Helmand, and Shindand (Herat).

The interviewee said Quetta has been negotiating for three years with Kabul and was ready to make peace as soon as its conditions were accepted. This could also happen before the elections. The vice president of the High Peace Council, Qazi Amin Waqad, reportedly offered Mansur's Taliban three ministerial positions in exchange for an agreement with Kabul. The same source asserted that during Karzai's visit to Qatar, Karzai offered to postpone the elections through a Loya Jirga that would allow him to prolong his mandate until some agreement with the Taliban was reached. That appears to have been in response to the view expressed by Mansur's alliance that if an agreement is not reached before the elections, it will never be reached.

Mansur's group was ready to support a presidential candidate as long as he was a "Muslim" and did not have any relationship with Western forces. These qualities seem to be interpreted quite liberally, as all the names under consideration by Mansur had held positions in the government and had some relation with the West.

A candidate linked to Hizb-i Islami would be acceptable, even if Mansur's men have some problems with this party, as Hizbis are "better than the Afghan government anyway." It was, however, judged premature to talk about a Taliban candidate in 2014 unless a peace deal with all Taliban was reached prior to the polls. Among the cadres, support for potential Hizb-i Islami candidates is not uncommon. Whether or not the candidate to be endorsed in 2014 openly talked about peace with the Taliban was not judged to be important because the Taliban expected most of the candidates to be positive about peace talks anyway.

The interviewed leader further stated that they could only guarantee not to attack the elections as far as their own directly controlled forces were concerned; Kabul would have to talk to the other factions of the Taliban to achieve a comprehensive agreement. In general, he seemed to be trying to dampen any optimism of what an eventual agreement over the elections could achieve: He pointed out that in many areas people were against the elections because of the "cruelty of the foreigners" and the corruption of the government. If there was a deal on the elections, he estimated that violence could decrease by perhaps 40 percent, but that it would not stop altogether, because of designs of the neighboring countries: He claimed that the Peshawar Taliban were under tight control of a foreign security service and were therefore all against elections. Zakir too was against the elections because, in the interviewee's opinion, he was fully paid by foreign intelligence.

In addition, the interviewed leader admitted that there were some people in Mansur's own turf, within the Rahbari Shura and Baradar mahaz, who were against the elections. In this regard, Mullah Naim was opposed to Akhtar Mansur's talks with Karzai over the elections and negotiated with Zakir about joining his alliance. Naim's men in fact confirmed that Naim had decided to realign with Zakir in spring 2013.

Perhaps more importantly, there have also been defections toward Zakir's camp among the ranks of the Dadullah and Baradar mahaz. In addition to being reported by Zakir's associates, some of the interviewed cadres corroborated the possibility of such defections. In Baghlan, some of Dadullah's mahaz commanders were reported not to be against blocking the elections. Dadullah's representative in a district of Baghlan said that he had no final orders yet, adding that he was willing to support the elections if so ordered. However, he said that he hoped the villagers would not participate in the elections. In Kajaki, a Dadullah mahaz cadre had an intermediate position on the elections, rejecting both Zakir's position of disrupting them and the Mansur alliance's inclination to negotiate, criticizing the leadership for selling itself for money.

In Ghazni, too, one of Dadullah's representatives stated his intent not to attack the electoral process, but at the same time he voiced his distaste for the negotiating efforts of the leaders and his belief that they were selling out for opportunistic reasons. In Logar, some of Dadullah's cadres seemed intent on disrupting the elections, like the Peshawar Shura and Zakir, but others were willing to follow orders not to do so, and one even stated that he would not attack the electoral process in any case if a foreign withdrawal was implemented because "I took up arms to fight the foreigners." In Logar, both Dadullah's and Baradar's commanders were divided over the elections. In Nangarhar, Dadullah's mahaz appears to be opposed to elections, according to Taliban election official.

At the opposite end of the Taliban spectrum, there are reportedly Taliban who promised elders their support for the elections: An elder in Reg said that Afghan Taliban attended a meeting with possible presidential candidate Qayyum Karzai and stated their intent to allow the elections, blaming "Pakistani Taliban" like Zakir for fomenting insecurity for external minders. The fact that Mansur had not issued clear guidelines by April 2013 was causing confusion among his cadres. That could explain why many of them, at the time of being interviewed, still adopted an aggressive attitude, particularly in Dadullah's mahaz but not only there. A Dadullah mahaz cadre in Daychopan (Zabul) said that he was still waiting for orders from Mansur and that up to then there were no real differences between different mahaz concerning the elections; only if the requests of Akhtar Mansur's alliance were accepted by Karzai, then a real difference with Zakir's would emerge. Similarly, the Baradar mahaz's representative in two districts of Kandahar said that it was not yet clear what they would do with regard to the elections, although he believed that the withdrawal of foreign troops was still condition sine qua non for supporting the elections.

As of early summer 2013, it appeared that individual mahaz commanders were not receiving a coherent message from upper-level leadership about the elections; this might be because no message has yet been articulated due to fluidity in regional politics, the absence of clear presidential candidates, changing dynamics surrounding peace negotiations, or simply because the elections were still too distant to warrant a definite decision. There seemed, however, to be a concern for the consequences of disunity within the Taliban's ranks and therefore a desire for a unified position, whatever that might ultimately be.

As of early summer 2013, it appeared that individual mahaz commanders were not receiving a coherent message from upper-level leadership about the elections.

Ideological Views about Elections and Negotiations

Taliban Views

The Peshawar Shura and Zakir's Alliance

The line that Taliban cadres have been told to propagate by the Peshawar Shura to justify opposition to the electoral process was one of objection to fraudulent elections and foreign interference in the process. According to one cadre,

Taliban are not against elections. We say that we support a fair and clean election. The elections should be an Islamic election; foreign countries should not be involved in the elections and the staff of the election commission should be real Muslims and should not be sympathizers of any candidates. Unfortunately, the elections that were run by the Karzai government with the support of foreign countries were completely based on fraud. The elections were funded by the Americans, and all the staff of the election commission were sympathizers of the different candidates—the warlords, criminals, and the rich people who pay money to buy their own election as president or member of Parliament, and these kind of people win the election by their force, money and fraud. . . . It's very clear that this election will also be rigged by the Afghan government and America. America is not crazy to spend its money on the elections and let someone win the election who is not in favor of America.

Some Taliban cadres even hinted that the Taliban might have always wanted to have elections:

When the Islamic Emirate of Taliban had the control of Afghanistan, the Taliban couldn't find that chance to hold the election. The Taliban was a new-born government and we needed to first solve internal problems. The Taliban needed to collect the weapons from the people and the Taliban was fighting in some provinces and districts of Afghanistan. . . . I am sure that if our government continued two more years, the Taliban would hold an election for electing the president of Afghanistan. . . . If we win the war and again take control of Afghanistan, we cannot hold an election for a few years, but then we would have an election also.

Alternatively, they suggest that the Taliban might accept elections in the future, allowing everybody to run except for “criminals.” Elders sometimes accepted this line as credible. One elder commented that “the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan is good for independence and liberty of Afghanistan,” because “the presence of international troops in the country is the reason behind the fighting and killing of innocent civilians in the country.” He was confident that after the withdrawal of the foreign troops from the country, there will be less fighting, and “there might be possibility of peace between Taliban and Afghan government.”

These Taliban views might not be representative. It was more common to hear from Taliban cadres more sombre and absolutist viewpoints:

- “We want an Islamic government, but this is a democratic government.”
- “In Islam there is no democracy.”
- “Most of the people are unhappy with the elections happening in the country. It is only those westernized people who accept these elections.”
- “The process of election is incompatible with Islam because they give people illicit liberties. For example, women are going to the polling stations and women are participating in the election, so we can say this is incompatible with Islam.”
- “People gave votes to Karzai, but he did not defend our Holy Book Quran Sharif, which was burnt in many places by foreign forces such as in Bagram Airport. These elections give so much independence to people that many wedding halls are established, but no madrasas. Because of these elections that drinking wine, illegal relationships, and illegal activities take place without restriction.”

One reason for disbelieving that elections could bring any good was the failure of “good” candidates to get votes. According to one cadre, “You see the candidates who are working for country and who were real Muslims do not get three votes.”

The views of one member of the Peshawar Shura was particularly authoritative because of his high-level position. He claimed that Western-style elections had thus far only led Afghanistan down the wrong path and that most Afghans were tired of elections and accompanying corruption and were not interested in participating. The aim, according to him, was to take Kabul and organize an Islamic government in Afghanistan. The Taliban drew comfort from the fact that in their view the Pakistani establishment was against elections in Afghanistan because it too saw American influence as a danger. He seemed to believe that in a Taliban government there could be elections with large participation and without corruption, but also without women’s participation.

When asked to qualify his views, even one of the “liberal” Taliban cadre in Peshawar sounded more in line with the hard-liners:

The Taliban have a different system and different government policy. If the Taliban were the government again, Mullah Mohammad Omar Akhund would be the leader again. We never held an election to replace Mullah Omar in the past, and it would never happen in the future either. If the Taliban made a coalition government and shared the government with all the nationalities of Afghanistan, maybe we would have parliamentary elections, but I am not sure that we would have a presidential election, because it is impossible to replace our Amir-ul-Momenin [leader of the faithful, Mullah Mohammed Omar].

The model these Taliban seemed to have in mind is sometimes an Islamic autocracy, sometimes a limited democracy:

- “If elections are good, why are there no elections in Saudi Arabia?”
- “Maybe we would follow the Iranian system of a leader and president . . . we would have an elected president under control of Mullah Mohammad Omar Akhund.”

Elections might be compatible with Islam, said one cadre, because after all the Taliban leadership has always been doing internal elections. One notes the confusion between general elections and internal leadership selection as being very common among Zakir’s Taliban, which could reflect a lack of serious discussion about the issue.

Mansur’s Alliance

One Quetta Shura member stated that elections can be acceptable if there is no foreign interference. It is all about supporting the right person, a good Muslim. His thinking about elections in principle is, however, indistinguishable from that of the more conservative members of Zakir’s coalition:

If the Taliban were the government, we would not do elections because when there is an Islamic government, there is no need of elections. . . . If we wanted to do elections, we would do the elections like we did in Islamabad when we appointed Zakir military leader of the Taliban.

Interestingly, this leader of Mansur’s alliance did not seem to have thought very hard about how a peace process would look beyond an agreement among leaders. For the military wing of the Taliban, for example, Mansur’s alliance does not seem to have developed a clear position regarding reintegration or demobilization of Taliban fighters. The Mansur alliance interviewee was thinking in terms of reintegration or the creation of a new paramilitary force similar to the local police but certainly not of merging Taliban fighters into the Afghanistan National Army.

Cadres associated with Mansur’s alliance were also mostly hostile to elections in principle. Only one commander associated with the Rahbari Shura held moderate views:

If the peace talks reach positive results, the Taliban won't have a problem with the Kabul government and therefore they won't attack the government. If there is a share for the Taliban in the government and the system is Islamic, there is no threat from the Taliban. After the withdrawal of the international troops, the Taliban will solve their problems with the Kabul government through negotiations and talks. . . . The Taliban also think that the elections are good for the people of Afghanistan, but they have a problem with the fraud associated with elections. . . . The presence of U.S. troops in the country makes the elections illegitimate because there is the possibility of interference and manipulation by the U.S. government in the elections. . . . The Taliban will have their own elections after the international troops leave. They will publicize them and convince people to participate.

Otherwise the picture looked similar to the one discussed earlier for Zakir's alliance and the Peshawar Shura. Most of the interviewees belonged to Dadullah's network, the largest within Mansur's alliance but also characterized as hard-line until autumn 2012. This might explain why these cadres all sounded hostile to elections, with arguments such as the following:

- "When there is an Islamic government, there is no need of elections."
- "There is no need for elections because Afghanistan is a poor country. The money that is spent on the election, it must be given to the people who do not have food."
- "The only election necessary would be standing a few good Taliban individuals and selecting from them, or perhaps a Loya Jirga."

Yet the single cadre from the nominally less hard-line Baradar network sounded exactly the same: "When a country is so economically weak, there is no need of an election. . . . If we wanted to have elections, we would collect good scholars and do an election between ourselves."

These statements seem to confirm that the greater tolerance for the electoral process among the leaders of Mansur's alliance might indeed be purely tactical, not reflecting widespread feelings within the rank and file and not percolating down the ranks at least for now.

The Taliban's Rank and File

Except for some team and group commanders aligned with the major alliances discussed in this report, the Taliban rank and file were usually oblivious to the internal debates that characterize the movement, and their views were often not aligned with those of the leaders. In Nangarhar, for example, only the Peshawar Shura and Zakir's alliance were active, but the fighters interviewed showed a wider range of views than their leaders. None argued against elections in principle, and some of their arguments resembled those of Mansur's alliance and of the Rahbari Shura, which has no presence in Nangarhar.

- "Elections are allowable in Islam, but without women's participation, and all candidates should be educated in Islamic studies."
- "Elections are allowable in Islam, but only candidates with religious education should be allowed."
- "We need a president who would defend the rights of Pashtuns."
- "If the president was a real Muslim, the Taliban might support him."
- "Elections are possible, but should take place once peace is established so that all the people can participate."
- "The Taliban would not attack the electoral process after a foreign withdrawal, but Taliban who are from Pakistan will not accept elections in any case, because they operate in Pakistan's interest, which is to prevent Afghanistan's development."
- "Right now the elections are for northerners and Dari speakers."

The Taliban rank and file were usually oblivious to the internal debates that characterize the movement, and their views were often not aligned with those of the leaders.

On negotiations with the Karzai government to end fighting, however, the views of the Nangarhar rank and file were more in line with Peshawar and Zakir. A fighter from Achin district said he would not stop fighting until an Islamic government was in place. A cadre from Shirzad district was keen to keep fighting after the foreign withdrawal, until victory or an agreement was reached, on the grounds that the Afghan government was corrupt and un-Islamic. A different fighter from the same district said that negotiations might succeed if they included all Taliban groups, rather than just those represented by the Mansur alliance, basically asking for Peshawar and Zakir to take part in negotiations.

One fighter was certain he would stop fighting once the foreigners left Afghanistan and stated that he would want to vote in the elections if this happened.

The discrepancies noted above are not unique to Nangarhar. Among the five fighters interviewed in Kandahar, only three were more or less aligned with their own network. One fighter in Shah Wali Kot district from Mansur's alliance was certain he would stop fighting once the foreigners left Afghanistan and stated that he would want to vote in the elections if this happened. In 2009 and 2010, he took part in the campaign against the elections. At the time of the interview (summer 2013), he was waiting for Mansur's orders but said he would nonetheless stop fighting if foreign soldiers left Afghanistan. In general, he supported government development initiatives and believed that elections were a good thing, provided that women did not have the right to vote. Without Zakir on board, however, he acknowledged that the elections would still be seriously disrupted.

Another fighter from Kandahar city said he too would stop fighting if there was a foreign withdrawal. He said he would like to vote and have as many Pashtuns voting as possible to weaken the hold of Dari speakers on government. Like the fighter from Shah Wali Kot, he acknowledged that without the cooperation of Zakir's alliance there would not be peaceful elections. He was positive about the negotiations led by Mansur and thought the Taliban should accept the offer of positions in the government. A third fighter from a front aligned with Zakir based in Panjwai district believed elections were allowable in the absence of foreign forces.

The other two fighters were not aligned with the positions expressed by their leaders. A fighter from Nesh, despite belonging to the relatively moderate mahaz of Mullah Baradar, believed elections were not lawful in Islam, although he also thought that if a foreign withdrawal took place the Taliban might endorse the elections. He also believed that a peace deal should be made with the Taliban as a whole and not with just a few individuals. The fifth fighter also diverged from his mahaz leader's views. Despite being a Dadullah commander in Kandahar, he talked of Zakir as his leader and the one who is expected to issue orders about the elections and was inclined to oppose the coming elections.

Most of the fighters interviewed in Nangarhar and Kandahar had at least some religious education. In Baghlan, the views of the Taliban fighters concerning elections confirmed that illiterate fighters (the majority) remain in the dark about electoral processes:

I don't know what [the Parliament's] job is. I only know that people sit together fighting each other. . . . I know that we have three kinds of elections, which are presidential, parliamentary, and Provincial Council. But I don't know about the work or duties of any of these offices. . . . Knowing of the election is not our duty; our duty is to implement the orders of our commanders. We have lots of people who are following politics and the elections, and then they will tell us to what to do.

The common fighters lacked knowledge about elections but assumed that elections were not compatible with Islam because otherwise the Taliban would not oppose them:

In Islam it's not allowed to have elections; in Islam we have Amir-ul-Momenin, and Amir-ul-Momenin has the right to select people for the leading of a country. Now we have Mullah Omar as Amir-ul-Momenin and only he has the power and right to select people for leading the country. As I remember, during the Taliban period, there weren't elections and Amir-ul-Momenin Mullah Sahib Mohammad Omar had the power to select people.

The other commonly cited reason for opposing the electoral process among the Baghlan rank and file was foreign interference. Although some stated that elections would only be possible after the Taliban's final victory, not all fighters ruled out the Taliban collaborating to allow the elections:

The Taliban will enable the election if foreign troops leave Afghanistan and the Taliban and Afghan government reach an agreement. . . . There is permission for elections in Islam; an election is not something bad for choosing the country's leaders. But Islam does not say that the elections should be run by the nonbelievers, that the elections should be funded by the nonbelievers, that elections are for choosing an American puppet government, that elections should be fraudulent and that the candidates should be.

An important qualification was that the elections should lead to the establishment of an Islamic government, which could not happen if foreigners were controlling the process. Thus, the same fighter quoted who allowed for the possibility of elections could in the same breath make very ruthless statements about any potential attempt to lobby Taliban into allowing the 2014 elections:

If a group of villagers came to [lobby] me, I am sure that they would be the government dogs. I would kill all of them immediately and get a reward from my commander for having killed some government dogs.

Postwithdrawal negotiations, in this fighter's view, could only lead to the establishment of an Islamic government:

I don't have an interest in fighting or holding weapons without any reason—now the reason why I hold a weapon is fighting against the foreign invaders and the corrupt American government. When the foreign troops leave Afghanistan, we will have again a new clean election. Then there won't be any reason for me to keep my weapon. If the foreign troops leave Afghanistan and a new Islamic government comes to Afghanistan, I am very happy to lay down my weapon and live with my family.

It is unlikely that decision making at the top of the Taliban will be seriously constrained by the views of the fighters at the bottom of the organization. The latter's views were in any case quite confused and often incoherent. Moreover, the fighters seemed to hold little expectation of being consulted before decisions being taken. They appeared to accept the fact that consultation would only involve Taliban notables and the choice available to them would be either to obey orders or walk away if they could. Nonetheless, the unrehearsed views of these fighters, even if at times confused or self-contradictory, demonstrate a greater diversity of thinking on elections than might have been expected.

External Views: Community Elders

Elections

Virtually all the elders interviewed for this study agreed that the Taliban would not hold elections if they were in power, but at most they would have some internal process for selecting their own leaders. The Taliban were perceived as a clerical oligarchy, which would claim all the power for itself if it had a chance. That is why few elders wished for a total Taliban victory, even when they would have been happy to see foreign forces gone and the current Kabul government removed from power.

The elders had mixed views about the extent to which those in their community would be motivated to go to the polls in 2014. Some argued that they were interested, others that they were disappointed and would not vote, others still that villagers would not vote out of fear even if they wanted to. Almost all elders believed that the Taliban would not allow the elections. In much of the "Pashtun belt," the ability of the government to organize the elections was in serious doubt, as pointed out by one elder:

The unrehearsed views of these fighters demonstrate a greater diversity of thinking on elections than might have been expected.

I am completely sure that the election will not happen there. In our district [Sayed Abad], even if the government brings thousands of police for ensuring the security of the district on the day of election, I am sure that people will not come out of their houses for voting. Because villagers understand that if they vote, these thousands of police and security forces will not remain in Sayed Abad district forever. They will move back after the election, then the Taliban will punish all the villagers who went to vote.

Only one of the elders interviewed believed that the Taliban could plausibly support a presidential candidate, or even field one of their own, based on his experience of 2010, when the Taliban supported parliamentary candidates in various locations.

Many elders accepted the Taliban's criticism of past elections, pointing out how the 2010 parliamentary elections were dominated by "criminals and warlords." In general, their expectations for 2014 were low, as they expected rigging and interference by strongmen. For some, the fact that the Taliban would try to prevent the vote did not really matter as they were disappointed enough in the process and the quality of candidates to not vote anyway.

On the elections as such, the views expressed by the elders were in some ways as conservative as those of the Taliban, even if these elders firmly opposed them:

Elections are compatible with Islam, and it is in the hands of the people whether to select a good person or bad person as a president. One thing that is necessary to say is that Pashtun women cannot vote, so it would be better if the women of other ethnic groups do not participate in the election either. There should also be no permission for women to advance their candidacy in the parliamentary and presidential election.

An elder in Mohammad Agha (Logar) did not believe elections were a good way for selecting the right people and would favor a Loya Jirga instead. A Mohmand Dara (Nangarhar) elder considered the elections wasteful and regretted having taken part in previous ones, echoing a Taliban position that holding elections did not make sense given poverty levels in the country:

If the economy of a country is weak, there is no need to have elections like in Afghanistan, because Afghanistan does not have the power to pay their employees a salary.

One elder argued that even if elections were a good thing for Afghanistan (he was not convinced), the presence and actions of foreign troops discredited the concept, which was in essence another Taliban trope:

I think whoever is chosen it can be decided by America—as the United States is more involved in Afghanistan's affairs. But I know Karzai cannot participate again for next year's presidential elections, because the United States wants him to be removed. If the United States wants him to remain in his position, then somehow the United States and Karzai will manage to do something with the aim of keeping power before next year. Afghanistan's constitution is not legally implemented and not important either for Karzai or the United States—they only want their own interests in Afghanistan. Whatever they want can be done in Afghanistan.

Perhaps the position of most elders could be characterized as being, in principle, keen to participate in the elections because that is what the system offered in terms of trying to send somebody to Kabul to lobby for them; this did not necessarily imply that they considered the system brought to Afghanistan after 2001 as working better than any of the alternatives:

I have witnessed the Taliban's government too. The appointed commander, district and provincial governors maintained good relations with the people. They were very easily reachable by the people.

Those elders favoring the elections did so because they felt elections were a means of staving off the bloodshed that has often accompanied transfers of power in the last thirty years. Another common rationale for voting was to prevent a victory of the northern factions or of a Pashtun puppet perceived to be doing the bidding of northerners:

We will go to the polling station and give the votes to the person who is a great leader, not like Karzai. We want to support a person who is Pashtun and who can work for Pashtuns, but Karzai did not work for Pashtuns; he only worked for northerners.

Negotiations with the Taliban

As was revealed in interviews with the fighters in particular, the question of elections could not be totally divorced from that of negotiations. This is also true of the discourse of the international community, where elections are alternatively portrayed as a means of either ratifying a political deal or of solidifying the legitimacy of a new Afghan government so that it is able to conclude a deal. Only one of the elders interviewed believed the Afghan National Army could hold the Taliban in check on its own, and oddly, he was one of the most hostile to the government. Some believed that tribal militias would add the required strength to keep the Taliban at bay. Others hoped that massive external help would continue to be provided.

Only one elder wished for the war to continue, primarily because it benefited his opium business. On the other hand, only one elder completely opposed any deal with the Taliban (he had lost two sons to them). An elder who was particularly inclined to incorporate the Taliban into the government argued:

If they come for peace, a share of power should be given to them. This is not a privilege but their right. The Taliban will ask for a share in the coming government if they reach an agreement. They will ask for key ministries in the government. We want peace in Afghanistan, and for us it is not a big matter what positions or what power the Taliban will take after they make a peace with the Afghan government.

The expectation was that concessions would have to be made to the Taliban in order to achieve a peace settlement. This was overwhelmingly acceptable to the elders interviewed, even if they did not have clear ideas about what these compromises could be. They seemed to be thinking mostly in terms of Taliban ministers and governors being appointed or of restraints on “development” and “modernization” to appease conservative sentiments. Even those skeptical about the possibility of such an agreement, given objections on both sides, welcomed it in theory, with the exception of the individual who had lost two sons to the Taliban.

The almost universally supported best-case scenario for the future was a peace settlement, where the Taliban would be incorporated into a coalition government. Even the elders most sympathetic to the Taliban considered a peace deal and a coalition government as the best possible outcome. Implicitly or explicitly, the thinking was that this would not only tame the Taliban but also restrain the corruption of the Kabul government. Some also viewed the incorporation of the Taliban into a future coalition government as a way to rebalance what they considered the excessive power and influence of northern factions in Kabul.

The elders had their own views about the relevance of the “Afghan Taliban” versus “Pakistani Taliban” dichotomy for the prospect of negotiations. A view expressed by some was that peace should be achieved with the Afghan Taliban but that the Pakistani Taliban should be defeated. Opinion was divided, however, about the willingness of the Afghan Taliban to pursue a deal. Those living in areas with a strong presence of mahaz linked to Mansur tended to be more optimistic. By contrast, those living in areas dominated by Peshawar or Zakir could not see any prospect of a deal.

Others acknowledged that regardless of internal Afghan Taliban divisions, the group as a whole was completely controlled by Pakistani intelligence:

If Mullah Omar is a candidate of the presidential elections, and Pakistan decides to tell the mujahideen not to vote for him, then Mullah Omar cannot get a single vote. Overall the Taliban is dependent on Pakistan and Pakistan rules them.

Even the elders most sympathetic to the Taliban considered a peace deal and a coalition government as the best possible outcome.

Foreign military withdrawal was generally seen as conducive to deal making. Generally, elders considered the withdrawal of foreign troops a positive development because they considered the foreign military presence to be a source of instability:

The withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan is good for the independence and liberty of Afghanistan. The presence of international troops in the country is the reason behind the fighting and killing of innocent civilians. After the withdrawal of the foreign troops, there will be less fighting and the people will live in security and prosperity and there might be a possibility of peace between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

Another elder argued that it would not make much sense to negotiate with an outgoing president; the Taliban would probably opt to negotiate with his successor.

Conclusion

The best chance for elections to be carried out in much of Afghanistan with minimum violence and maximum voter turnout is through some kind of understanding or informal agreement with the Taliban. Compared with 2009 and 2010, there appears to be at least some hope that this might happen. Undoubtedly, the debate within the Taliban concerning elections in Afghanistan continues to evolve. Some factions within the Taliban have started to shift from total rejection toward a more tactical and pragmatic approach, not necessarily because their views have changed but perhaps because the political landscape has been evolving due to Western disengagement.

It is difficult to assert with certainty that the ideological position of the Taliban has stayed the same, as no such survey was conducted in previous years. As shown, however, many Taliban remain ideologically opposed to elections involving free competition and mass participation (particularly of women). Should they accept the electoral process at some point, they would view this acceptance as a tactical concession in order to win equivalent concessions from their counterparts. In other words, the terms under which the elections were conducted would be part of the negotiated political arrangement.

Those Taliban who expressed a willingness to accept the idea of elections, particularly among the rank-and-file fighters, qualified their acceptance in ways that would likely be unacceptable to any Western policymaker: no voting rights for women and restrictions on the right of individuals to advance their candidacy. This is not surprising given the stage of the conflict and the ideological and cultural point of departure of the Taliban. While it is still too early for them to debate such issues openly, the fact that an internal debate has started is already a remarkable development.

The position of the various internal Afghan Taliban alliances with regard to the electoral process can be summarized as follows:

- Zakir's alliance and his closest allies in Quetta totally oppose the electoral process;
- The Peshawar Shura is in opposition to the electoral process and has done the most planning to prevent the elections but is discreetly leaving a door open to taking some part if they see participation to their advantage;
- Mansur's alliance and certain members of the Rahbari Shura are more ready than any other group to allow the electoral process to go forward as a step toward facilitating peace negotiations with Kabul, but with many strings attached.

The position of the Peshawar Shura is the most interesting from an analytical standpoint. They have been clearly preparing for being in a position to manipulate the electoral process; the process started at a time when relations between Karzai and the Pakistani authorities seemed to be improving quickly and a consensus candidate, supported by both Karzai and the Pakistanis, seemed a real possibility. By the spring, it all seemed to have faded away, but Afghan-Pakistan relations

have known many ups and downs after 2001 and particularly since 2010. It is not unfathomable, therefore, to speculate that Islamabad might still hope that President Karzai would once again reconsider his options, particularly after a violent spring–summer 2013 fighting season.

The selection of Zakir as new military leader of all Taliban in early 2013 and his subsequent effort to intensify military operations likely instilled a sense of his rising power among the Taliban, even in areas such as the south where Mansur's alliance is strong. Most Taliban therefore find the position articulated by Zakir—"no negotiations until all foreign soldiers have left Afghanistan"—attractive not only for ideological reasons but also for tactical ones. The Western withdrawal would dramatically reduce the leverage of the Kabul government at the negotiating table. This ban on negotiations concerns not just peace talks; it also affects negotiations over the elections.

Only Zakir's personal rivals, mostly concentrated in Mansur's alliance, see waiting as a bad option. They might perceive the strengthening of the Taliban over time as synonymous with the strengthening of Zakir, possibly at their expense. For them, the best option would be a deal before the Western withdrawal is complete, although for reasons of image and ideology, they will have to wait until the withdrawal is well under way. Discussing a deal over the elections gives them leverage over regional powers opposed to negotiations in Afghanistan, which Mansur can use to extract financial and other support. When Mansur asks for complete withdrawal, it might just be a negotiating position; in reality, he might be satisfied with having a few provinces (where his alliance is strong) freed of foreign presence.

Mansur's agreement over the elections would not necessarily lead to a wider peace agreement, because his position appears to be tactical. It does not look likely, therefore, that even if Mansur agreed to tolerate the electoral process, or somehow facilitate it, this would lead to much progress toward a peace settlement. Mansur is aware of his relative military weakness and of the fact that a separate deal would place him in an awkward position. In practice, such a deal would become feasible only if a non-Pashtun candidate were likely to win, in which case many Taliban could accept at least to de facto abstain from disrupting the elections in the Pashtun belt. This possibility, however, is not discussed openly at this stage, a fact that is not surprising since it would negate the negotiating leverage of Mansur's alliance vis-à-vis Kabul. Mansur's strategy, as of late spring 2013, was to negotiate but to make demands that would be very onerous for President Karzai to accept. Protracted negotiations give Mansur at least some political leverage. It also positions him as the gatekeeper to the negotiating process, should the Taliban's alignments change in the future. The elections therefore would allow Mansur and his allies to revitalize stalled negotiations, as well as obtain concessions from Kabul.

Among the Taliban's rank and file, there is a lot of confusion and prejudice toward the electoral process. Prejudice means that many Taliban fighters find it easy to reject elections when ordered to do so by their leaders. Confusion, on the other hand, means that many Taliban can express views in contrast with those of the leadership without even being aware of it. Given the absence of much enthusiasm for the elections among the population and the low expectation among rank-and-file Taliban of influencing decision making, it is unlikely that if the Taliban continue in their stiff opposition to the presidential elections there will be much of a backlash among the rank and file. By the same token, a Taliban turnout resulting in an endorsement of the elections would be more difficult to sell to the rank and file. A move of this kind would have to be disguised as some kind of force majeure, such as the previously discussed possibility of a non-Pashtun candidate emerging as a likely winner because of the Taliban's disruption being mostly concentrated in Pashtun-populated areas.

In sum, there appears to be little genuine interest in the elections per se among the Taliban. The real debate is about how to best exploit a key vulnerability of Kabul and its international supporters to the advantage of the different components of the insurgency: Holding the elec-

Among the Taliban, the real debate is about how to best exploit a key vulnerability of Kabul and its international supporters to the advantage of the different components of the insurgency.

tions is a key benchmark of NATO success in Afghanistan, and the insurgents' cooperation might well be necessary to make that possible. It is not clear to what extent Karzai and the international community are aware of the differences among the insurgents' ranks (concerning elections, but also on other issues), which also represent a vulnerability to be exploited. In 2013 and 2014, in any case, negotiations over the elections and a peace settlement are likely to continue to be seen by the Taliban as just another way of furthering the conflict, rather than as a way to end it. But the situation remains fluid, and the position of the insurgency could evolve further, having already evolved considerably.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations and data in this report come from these interviews. Geographically the interviews were distributed as follows: Quetta (one), Peshawar (one), Baghlan (fourteen), Balkh (five), Badghis (five), Helmand (four), Kandahar (nine), Ghazni (nine), Zabul (six), Logar (six), Nangarhar (eleven), Wardak (seven), and Kunduz (one).
2. The mapping of Taliban networks discussed in these pages is informed by interviews conducted specifically for this report and by hundreds of interviews carried out since 2011 for a project on the leadership and organization of the Taliban. Preliminary findings are presented in Claudio Franco and Antonio Giustozzi, *The Peshawar Shura and the Evolution of the Taleban's Military Leadership* (Berlin: Afghanistan Analysts Network, forthcoming).
3. The Gulbuddin Hekmatyar wing of Hizb-i Islami, also active in the insurgency, is not part of the Taliban and is therefore not discussed in this report.
4. See Matt Waldman, *The Sun in the Sky* (London: Crisis States Research Center, 2010).
5. "Commissions" are executive organs, the equivalent of ministries and departments.
6. Contacts with Taliban cadres in Peshawar and Quetta have indicated that the realignments were due to political differences between Naim (who was against talking to the government) and Mansur and due to the Dadullah group's resentment toward Zakir's arrogance. Pressure from foreign funders might also have played a role. Sources for this information were contacted in December 2012 and May 2013.
7. The estimates of the strength of the Taliban's subgroups derive from the research in Franco and Giustozzi, *The Peshawar Shura and the Evolution of the Taleban's Military Leadership*. The methodology consisted of interviewing Taliban cadres about their strength and the strength of other groups in their area of operations and then comparing and averaging the results. The sample of interviewees included members of all networks.
8. This view derives from interviews with community elders, who in the south often showed great respect for Mullah Baradar even as late as 2012.
9. On the evolution of the Taliban's internal alignments, see also Antonio Giustozzi, "Turmoil within the Taliban: A Crisis of Growth?" Central Asia Policy Brief no. 7 (Washington, DC: Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University, January 2013).
10. "Message of Felicitation of Amir-ul-Momineen (May Allah protect him) on the Occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr. August 5, 2013" (unofficial translation), <http://justpaste.it/3bmi> (accessed September 5, 2013). It is also notable that after a rambling and unspecific opening, the 2014 election is the first item specifically addressed—coming before peace talks or the bilateral security agreement. It is also worth noting that while the message contains many exhortations for the public to turn against the international military and their supporters in the Afghanistan National Security Forces, there is not an explicit call to attack the polls.
11. Stephen Graham, "U.S.: Taliban Rift over Failure to Crash Vote," *Herald-Sun*, October 21, 2004.
12. Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos* (London: Allen Lane, 2008), 259.
13. Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, "AIHRC-UNAMA Joint Monitoring of Political Rights, Presidential and Provincial Council Elections," Third Report, August 1–October 21, 2009.
14. In reality Abdullah Abdullah is of mixed Tajik and Pashtun ethnicity, but he was widely seen by Pashtuns in 2009 as a "Tajik" candidate.
15. The exception was an elder from Sangin who claimed his village was bombed by international forces.
16. Other examples include Moqur (Ghazni) and Maruf (Kandahar), where it was reported that Taliban were endorsing some candidates. This dynamic was less prevalent in the north, where the Taliban had weaker roots: for example, there is no indication that any candidate was being supported by the Taliban in Burka or Dand-i Ghori districts of Baghlan District, though in Badghis there were reports of Taliban being bribed to allow voting.
17. Personal communication with a Taliban cadre in Khost, November 2012.
18. The position held by Mansur's alliance toward the 2014 electoral process was, for most intents and purposes, the same as the position held by the majority of the Rahbari Shura.



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The future of the decade-long statebuilding effort in Afghanistan rests, in part, on whether the 2014 national elections are a success or failure. Although the Taliban have a consistent record of trying to violently disrupt elections in Afghanistan, signals have emerged in recent years that their attitude toward elections might be evolving. The best chance for elections to be carried out with minimum violence and maximum voter turnout is for the Afghan government to reach some kind of informal understanding with the Taliban.

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