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Power Transition in Afghanistan: Challenges Ahead

By Abdul Basit

Synopsis

The recent democratic power transfer in Kabul is a major milestone in Afghanistan's constitutional development. However, escalating Taliban attacks, slowing economic growth and weak Afghan security forces are some of the major challenges that the new Ghani-Abdullah administration has to overcome.

Commentary

THE INAUGURATION of Dr Ashraf Ghani as Afghanistan's President on 29 September 2014 marked the first democratic transfer of power in Kabul. Ghani will share power with his political rival Abdullah Abdullah who was sworn in as the country's first Chief Executive. This is a post created after a US-brokered power-sharing agreement between Ghani and Abdullah which ended the six-month long political crisis over claims of election fraud. The peaceful transition of power is a historic milestone in Afghanistan's evolving constitutional development.

Ghani's background as an international development expert who worked for the World Bank and a former Afghan finance minister makes him the most qualified man to lead Afghanistan at this critical juncture. However Ghani has inherited a weak state apparatus from his predecessor Hamid Karzai. From the outset he is facing daunting challenges on many fronts.

Building a strong team

Ghani's immediate challenge is to build a strong team of capable and honest men selected on merit to ensure good governance and implement economic reforms. His position as President in a unity government is much weaker than that of an independent President. He has come to power not on the strength of a popular vote but as a result of a deal.

He will have less independence to appoint his trusted people in key government positions and will have to share power with Abdullah and accommodate his interests and priorities in future plans. Even if Ghani and Abdullah cooperate with each other, the influential powerbrokers like Ata Noor Muhammad in Abdullah's camp and Uzbek warlord General Rashid Dostum (now the Vice President)

in Ghani's camp will hinder their efforts. Such powerbrokers will ask for their share of the pie by seeking powerful positions in the government.

Weak economy

Economic well-being is critical for the future stability of Afghanistan. Since 2011, Afghanistan has been facing a looming fiscal crisis visible through worsening domestic revenues. Reviving the shrinking Afghan economy and putting it on a path of stability and self-sustenance is Ghani's biggest challenge.

Afghanistan lacks the funds needed to deal with problems of bad governance, unemployment and endemic corruption. Currently 90 percent of Afghanistan's budget depends on foreign aid and funding from international donor agencies. In 2013, 95 percent of Afghanistan's annual GDP came from international aid and military spending. After 2014 this spending will decrease quite considerably. The expected pull out of NATO/ISAF troops from Afghanistan is already taking its toll on Afghanistan's economic growth, slowing it to 3.6 percent in 2013 from more than 14 percent in 2012.

The Afghan government does not have the capability to create employment opportunities for job seeking youth. The current unemployment rate in Afghanistan is 8.6 percent. Afghanistan desperately needs help in developing its private sector to create jobs and a sustainable economy. The future international aid is conditional on improvement in governance and reduction of corruption.

Emboldened Afghan insurgency

The Ghani administration faces a daunting task of ensuring strong Afghan security forces to face an emboldened Taliban insurgency. Afghan army and police are ill-equipped, poorly trained, inexperienced and lack the resources to take on the Taliban. Ahead of the completion of NATO's US-led combat mission in Afghanistan the Taliban have declared victory.

From next year, around 350,000 Afghan forces will be Afghanistan's first line of defence against the Taliban. The growing number of attacks by the Taliban will stretch the capacities of Afghan forces in the absence of the 150,000 strong international troops. By the end of this year the remaining NATO troops in Afghanistan will change their role from a combat mission to a training and support mission.

The Taliban still pose a grave security challenge to national stability in Afghanistan. They have rejected the national unity government in Afghanistan as a "sham" orchestrated by the US. The two high-profile attacks mounted by the Taliban near Kabul airport on 29 September, when Ghani and Abdullah were taking their oaths as President and Chief Executive of Afghanistan underscore the kind of threat that the Ghani-Abdullah administration is facing.

The recent increase in the Taliban attacks will only worsen next year. The Taliban have vowed to continue their Jihad till the complete withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan. They have also rejected Ghani's offer of peace talks.

Foreign relations

The signing of the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with Washington will put the estranged US-Afghanistan relations back on track. However, in future the positive trajectory of Afghanistan's relation with the US and international donor community will depend heavily on Ghani's economic reforms and anti-corruption agenda.

At the regional level, Ghani's biggest challenge will be how he handles Afghanistan's ties with India and Pakistan. In the last few years Afghanistan has emerged as an extended arena of India-Pakistan rivalry. Ghani needs the former for foreign investment, reconstruction of infrastructure and training of Afghan manpower in different fields; while he needs the latter to overcome the daunting security challenges by kick-starting the peace process with the Taliban.

India blames Pakistan for hurting its interest in Afghanistan through the Haqqani Network while Pakistan alleges that India is supporting the Baloch separatists through Afghanistan. The India-

Pakistan proxy war in Afghanistan will leave very little room for Ghani to tread a balanced path in maintaining cordial relations with the two regional powers.

Indeed, the lessons learnt from the Iraq and Syria civil wars leave very little room for proxy games, policy inaction and abandonment in Afghanistan. The signing of the BSA will also compel regional countries like India and Pakistan to rethink their Afghan policies. Continuation of turf-battles and proxy wars will only strengthen the hands of extremists and terrorists. Afghanistan's slide into chaos will put regional peace and stability at peril. A stable and peaceful Afghanistan holds the key to regional peace.

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