



VIOLENCE, THE TALIBAN, AND AFGHANISTAN'S 2014 ELECTIONS

Antonio Giustozzi and Silab Mangal



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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report focuses on the debate within the Taliban over how to respond to the first and second rounds of Afghanistan's 2014 presidential election, its first peaceful democratic transfer of power. Drawn on research undertaken in Afghanistan in May and June of 2014 and funded by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), the report examines both insurgent activities and the role of non-Taliban actors in electoral violence. Interviewees included Taliban members, elders, local strongmen, and a Ministry of Interior official.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

An independent researcher associated with King's College London, Antonio Giustozzi has written extensively on the insurgency and issues of governance in Afghanistan and focuses in particular on the internal dynamics of the Taliban as an organization and as a movement. He is the author of four books on Afghanistan and, with Mohammed Ishaqzada, one edited volume—*Policing Afghanistan* (Columbia University Press, 2013). Giustozzi holds a PhD from the London School of Economics and Political Science. Silab Mangal is a journalist and researcher based in Kabul and has been involved in research projects with Dr. Giustozzi since 2011.

Cover photo: Ballot boxes are sealed and labeled with a serial number to ensure all boxes are tracked and accounted for while they are being transported to Kabul. Photo courtesy U.S. Army. Photo by Spc. Nikayla Shodeen/Released. Defense video and imagery distribution system.

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United States Institute of Peace

2301 Constitution Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20037

Phone: 202.457.1700

Fax: 202.429.6063

E-mail: usip_requests@usip.org

Web: www.usip.org

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Summary

- Afghanistan's presidential election of 2014, its first peaceful democratic transfer of power, was not without controversy.
- It is one thing to view an election in a conflict zone through the perspective of normal electoral practices and another to do so through the eyes of insurgents.
- The other first of the election—that the Taliban might support a presidential candidate—was seriously discussed and early on even seemed likely.
- How the Taliban ended up figuring into the electoral process and how it emerges from it derive in part from its having no accepted overall leadership, a loose federative structure, and three primary factions.
- The debate within the Taliban over its election strategy—violence or no violence—was an extension of the larger debate over whether to negotiate with the government, shows considerable sophistication, and reveals the different strategic calculations by its internal factions.
- The election proved a contest of narratives as well as a contest of votes.
- This dimension is clear from the Afghan media boycott on the Taliban, the equanimity with which the candidates minimized allegations of fraud, the Taliban's need to recover from a propaganda defeat, and the international community's desire for a good news story out of Afghanistan.
- In the wake of the election, the implications of Taliban organization, policy, and action for Afghanistan's future are significant: deepened internal divisions, doubts about reform, greater pragmatism, and an eye to negotiations with the government.
- In sum, the Taliban may be moving closer to Afghan mainstream politics, even though it is still based on strongmen, manipulation, and patronage networks rather than on liberal and democratic principles.
- It is also true, however, that mainstream politics is becoming more violent and ruthless and in a sense is moving closer to the Taliban's way of doing things.

Introduction

The controversial 2014 Afghan election has yielded several instant narratives that together paint a hugely confusing picture of what actually happened—its political effect in the second-round results, the deal brokered by U.S. secretary of state John Kerry, and the initiation of a technically and logistically complex audit.

The audit might go some way to providing a clearer picture of who really voted for whom, and where. But the rest of the story of the 2014 election of anthropologist and economist Ashraf Ghani as president remains murky. What is the source of such confusion over what is designed as a transparent process? Part of the problem is that the election was not simply a contest of votes but also a contest of narratives. This was made especially clear in the decision by the Afghan media to boycott reporting on Taliban attacks, the equanimity with which both leading candidates minimized allegations of fraud in the first round, the Taliban's need to recover from what was widely seen as a propaganda defeat, and the desire of the international community for a rare good news story out of Afghanistan.

This report sheds additional light on what happened through the murky lens of how the Taliban viewed the election and what strategies they adopted in its wake. The interviews reveal differences within the Taliban on how to react. Some of the findings will certainly add to existing controversies about the election and may be debated by those who follow the Taliban closely.

The degree to which the Taliban might use the election to advance its strategic options was an open question in 2013. As noted elsewhere, it was clear by the end of that year that they would engage with the electoral process.¹ The degree of sophistication behind that engagement was another debatable point, and the findings here are particularly interesting. They reveal not only a high degree of sophistication among some of the groups analyzed but also different strategic calculations by different factions within the movement.

The debate within the Taliban over its election strategy was an extension of the longer debate over whether to engage in a negotiation process. Any decision to engage in such a way as to favor a victory by Ashraf Ghani, for example, was linked to the supposition that he would be a better negotiating partner. Those within the movement opposed to negotiating favored either attempting to undermine the elections entirely, and therefore prevent the emergence of a government, or—in a more Machiavellian fashion—influence the result so that Abdullah Abdullah would win, on the supposition that this would lead to a massive pro-Taliban Pashtun mobilization.

The current Taliban top-level organization is not insignificant in this context:

- The Quetta shura is the original home of the post-2001 Taliban and still claims a leadership role, though less and less accepted by the other Taliban shuras; its men operate in southern, western, and some parts of northern, central, and southeastern Afghanistan.
- The Miran Shah shura (also known as Haqqani network) declared its autonomy from Quetta around 2008 and operates mainly in southeastern Afghanistan and in parts of the central region.
- The Peshawar shura declared its autonomy from Quetta in 2009, is mostly composed of new Taliban (individuals who were not Taliban before 2001), and operates in eastern, central, northeastern, and parts of northern Afghanistan.

In the absence of an accepted overall Taliban leadership, the current structure of the Taliban could be described loosely as federative. Quetta does not officially accept its loss of leadership but can do little about the situation and implicitly accepts that it can only coordinate with the other shuras. This federal aspect of the Taliban has to be kept in mind in that the Taliban's attitude toward the elections varied greatly from shura to shura.

The election was not simply a contest of votes but also a contest of narratives.

It is one thing to view an election in a conflict zone through the perspective of normal electoral practices and another to do so through the eyes of insurgents. One example is the contention that the Taliban in some areas allowed or encouraged people to vote in pro-Ghani areas.

The problem viewed from an electoral practices point of view is the dilemma the Afghan election commission faced in each of the past elections. Should it compromise the integrity of the process by opening polling stations in insecure areas where the chance of ballots being stuffed is higher, even if such irregularity disenfranchises voters? Past commissions have been criticized for doing both. In 2009, the attempt to avoid disenfranchisement led to massive fraud; in 2010, the attempt to avoid fraud arguably led to disenfranchisement.

The question from the perspective of the insurgency is different. If insurgents allow voters in an area where they have power over the ability to vote, are they corrupting the process by doing so or facilitating the process by preventing disenfranchisement and allowing a result that would have occurred had the election taken place in more peaceful circumstances?

These questions have no clear answers, and the questions are also very new because of the novelty of holding elections during active insurgencies. Caution, however, needs to be exercised in drawing conclusions from this nexus between insurgent strategies and the conduct of elections.

In analyzing the Taliban from the outside, the obvious indicators are their own statements, the statements of others (including former Taliban) about them, and anecdotes. Understanding them from the inside, however, is limited by significant methodological obstacles. Taliban members at various levels (though rarely at the highest) will speak through contacts. But these contacts might not have access to the highest level of decision, where strategies are made. As with all cases of relayed information, each point of relay offers another opportunity for distortion or decay of information. This report draws on the contacts and expertise built up over the past few years to develop as comprehensive a picture as possible of the use of violence and intimidation in the 2014 elections. The researchers are all experienced Afghan journalists involved in previous research projects who understand the local context and therefore were in a position to use the contacts already developed to reach potential interviewees within the Taliban. Existing contacts were also used as introductions to new contacts to lay the ground for more comprehensive interviews.

In all, interviewees included twenty-nine Taliban, a mix of Pakistan-based leaders and Afghanistan-based cadres and commanders; twenty-four elders, to check the Taliban's version of events; a mix of ten local strongmen and elders, to assess the impact of sources of violence other than the Taliban; and a Ministry of Interior official, to obtain detailed data about electoral violence. The final tally of interviews conducted specifically for this project came to sixty-four.

Assessing the 2014 Election Violence

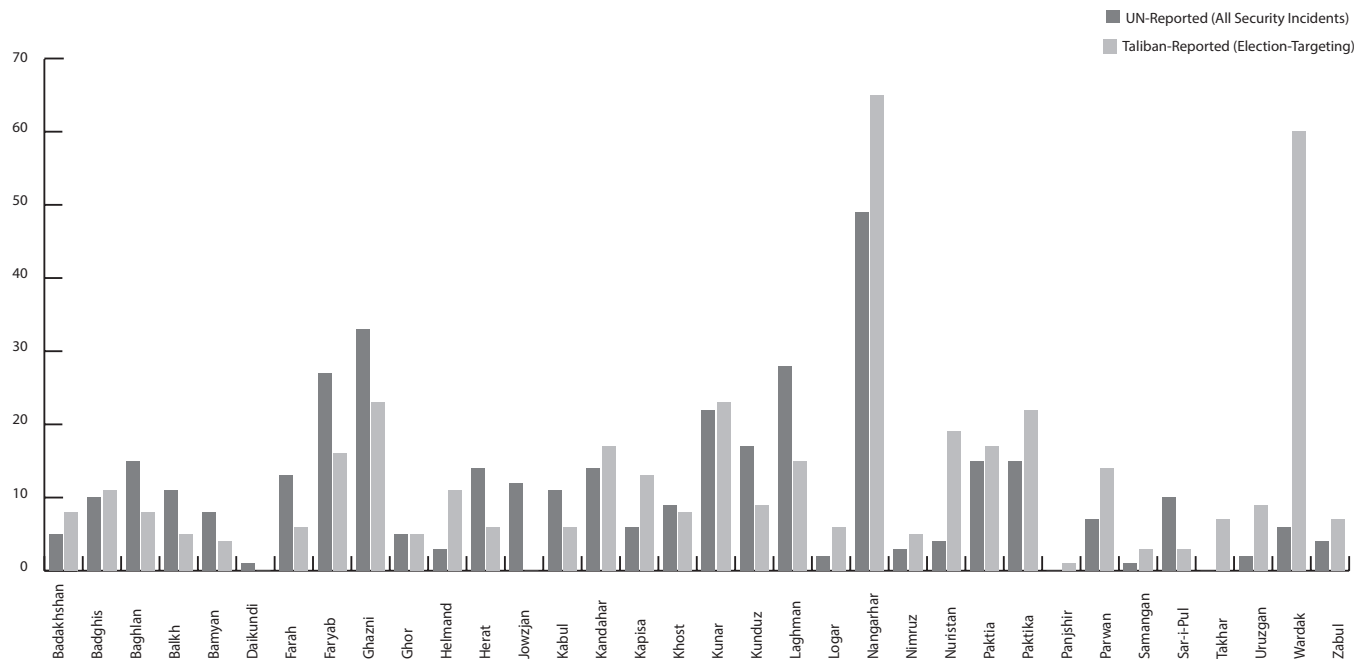
After the first round of the election on April 4, a debate in Kabul centered on the extent of the Taliban's campaign against the elections, which had been deliberately minimized in the Afghan press. Figures from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the Afghan authorities seemed to show a 10 percent decline in the level of violence on election day compared with the previous presidential election held in 2009. Doubts were raised over the reliability of these figures, however. Figures from the United Nations Department for Safety and Security (UNDSS) are comparable with those of ISAF and the Afghan authorities for 2014 but show a 28 percent increase in violence over the 2009 presidential election, though a decline against the 2010 parliamentary elections (see table 1). The press concurred with ISAF and Afghan authorities in presenting the first round as a Taliban failure to significantly disrupt the process, though in part this might have been due to a bias of the media toward reporting favorably on the electoral process.²

Table 1. Violence on Election Day

	NATO	UNAMA	IEC	UNDP	Taliban
Election day 2014	390	382			1,088
Election day 2009	435	299			
Election day 2010		488			
Directly related to 2014 elections		270			432
Polling stations closed			1,047	1,089	
Polling stations open			6,124	6,082	
ANSF killed		11			234

The Taliban, unsurprisingly, reported a much larger number of attacks against the electoral process, about three times the number reported by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) or NATO. In part, this might be because Taliban data incorporates not only attacks taking place on voting day but also those against electoral staff and candidates' teams before the election. However, if we look at the data breakdown by province (figure 1), it becomes clear that data gathering or misreporting are likely to be the real issues. In some cases, UNDSS and Taliban data almost coincide (as in Nangarhar and Kunar Provinces), but in others the UNDSS reported more incidents than the Taliban did (Laghman, Ghazni, and Faryab). Much of the Taliban's excess reporting is concentrated in a few provinces, one of which is Wardak. In other words, no uniform trend of Taliban overreporting is discernable, but a more complex picture suggests that some Taliban provincial leaders might have overreported or that UNDSS might have failed to catch many incidents.

Figure 1. Security Incidents on Election Day



The most important comparison is not across data sources, however, but between 2014 and the previous elections, particularly the presidential election in 2009. Taliban interviewees below the leadership level universally agreed that they carried out fewer attacks against the elections than in 2009. One Taliban source in Quetta, close to former Taliban military commander Abdul Qayum Zakir, estimated that in the south violence targeted at the electoral process was 60 percent lower than in 2009. The Taliban did not provide precise data for the violence they carried out in 2009 but instead estimates of how many villages or districts were prevented from voting in 2005, 2009, and 2014 (table 2). The average number of villages per district in Afghanistan is around 110 if we include unofficial districts.³ On the basis of the Taliban's own data, therefore, we could estimate a 6 percent fall in the number of villages prevented from voting in 2014 compared with 2005 (data for 2009 being incomplete).

Table 2. Taliban Claims About Prevented Voting

	2005	2009	2014
Districts	38	60	20
Villages	560		1,787

Are Taliban estimates of villages not voting accurate? Table 3 compares estimates obtained from the Taliban with those provided by some of the elders interviewed for this project. In the Nangarhar district of Khogyani, for example, the Taliban claim of forty villages not voting was only partially confirmed by local elders, who estimated that twenty-eight to thirty villages were not able to vote because of the Taliban and five more because of infighting among strongmen linked to different candidates. Of the twenty-eight to thirty villages, the elders believed that seventeen to twenty were prevented from voting by Pakistani fighters affiliated with Mangal Bagh, the leader of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)-affiliated group Lashkar-e-Islam, and the rest by the Afghan Taliban, who had determined that these villages would vote for Abdullah. Even the overall number of villages in Khogyani is a matter of dispute. The elders say between 100 and 108, the Taliban say 116, and other sources say up to 149.

Table 3 also shows that in several cases the elders' estimate of the impact of Taliban violence and intimidation was much higher than the Taliban's own. This is the case of Andar (Ghazni), Jaghatu (Wardak), Shindand and Gulran (Herat), Musa Qala (Helmand), and Tagab and Jurm (Badakhshan). The reasons for these varying assessments might differ from province to province, but in Ghazni, Herat, and Wardak, one might suspect underreporting by the Taliban to their leaders, who had ordered them to leave voters in peace.

In the south, on the other hand, the Taliban seemed to tend to overreport their achievements, but this might be because villages prevented from voting were usually in remote areas, whereas the elders were interviewed in the district centers or near them and might therefore have been unaware of disruption to the vote in such remote areas.

Table 3. Villages Prevented from Voting

	Taliban	Elders			
	2014	2014	2010	2009	2005
Logar					
Mohammad Agha	6		20		
Ghazni					
Dih Yak	14	10			
Andar	8	175			
Wardak					
Jaghatu	34	no village voted			
Sayed Abad	58	5 to 6, almost 60			
Faryab					
Qaysar	19	20			
Shirin Tagab	11	2			
Kohistan	4		40		
Nangarhar					
Khogyani	40	30			
Badakhshan					
Tagab		most villages			
Jurm		most villages			
Kandahar					
Arghandab	10	0			
Maruf	16			40	
Reg	6		37	20	6
Panjwai	8	0			
Zhari	3	0			
Herat					
Shindand	43				
Shindand	13	60 to 70 percent of up to 358 villages			
Gulran	6	more than 50 percent of up to 320 villages			
Helmand					
Sangin	54		76		
Musa Qala	9		all		
Musa Qala	5				

In sum, Taliban figures about the number of blockaded villages might in some cases have been deliberately inaccurate, insofar as some provincial cadres might have been trying to portray a picture that their leadership would like to receive. In some cases, the picture was better than the underlying reality, in some cases worse. Overall, it seems likely that the Taliban itself might have underestimated the impact of its suppression of voter turnout.

Targets

In terms of the human casualties inflicted, Taliban claims regarding the number of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF, both police and soldiers) killed while protecting the electoral process are well above what the ANSF will admit in public (table 1). However, this is always the case and therefore no surprise. The Taliban also claim having killed a much higher number of Independent Election Commission (IEC) staff than the IEC acknowledges, again in line with previous elections. However, sources within the Ministry of Interior (MoI) contacted for this study confirmed the deaths of 124 policemen who were protecting the electoral process. Considering that Afghan National Army losses and militia (*arbaki*) losses are not included in the MoI figure, Taliban claims of 234 ANSF and *arbaki* killed do not seem wildly inflated.

Table 4 also presents other interesting facts. Even in the Miran Shah shura, whose leadership, as discussed later, was the only one of the major Taliban regional commanders to have unanimously declared voters fair game, a modest number of voters were in fact reported killed—twelve in all. MoI figures place the number even lower, at ten.

The Peshawar shura leadership denies having ordered the killing of any voter and claims that its orders to spare voters were fully carried out. The numerous killings of voters in the provinces under the Peshawar shura were attributed by the shura's leadership to attacks by the Pakistani Taliban. Several Taliban commanders, however, admitted having killed voters. This project's interviewees alone claimed or reported the killing of fifty-seven civilians in areas under the control of the Peshawar shura, which is certainly not a comprehensive number given that surveying every province was not possible. The MoI counted forty-three voters killed in areas under the responsibility of the Peshawar shura.

Even in the Quetta shura there was some discrepancy between the claim of just six voters killed (offered by loyalists to commander Zakir) as shown in table 4 and reports by Taliban commanders and cadres on the ground, who reported eleven deaths despite representing sources from only a minority of provinces. The MoI counted as many as thirty-two voters killed within the Quetta shura area of command.

Table 4. Claims of Casualties Inflicted

	All Killed	ANSF + Arbaki (Taliban Sources) or ANP Only (MoI Figures)	IEC and Campaigners Staff	Voters
Taliban				
Quetta shura	76	53	17	6
Miran Shah shura	92	62	18	12
Peshawar shura	314	119	195	0
Total	482	234	230	18
MoI				
Quetta areas	105	48	25	32
Miran Shah areas	32	14	8	10
Peshawar shura	145	69	39	43
Total	275	124	73	85

Types

The tactic of choice adopted by the Taliban was long-range machine gun and rocket fire, which did not seem intended to cause significant casualties. Virtually all the elders interviewed agreed that Taliban violence consisted mainly of noise. For example, as an elder in Sayed Abad described it,

The attacks started at 8:00 am, and they lasted until night on the election day. The Taliban kept attacking the public road for four days after the elections because Taliban was thinking the convoy of ballot boxes of other provinces are crossing from the same road (Warkad-Kabul highway). . . . I don't know how many casualties we had in police, but two civilians got injured during these attacks. They were from remote areas.

According to local elders, even in Hazara and Tajik areas the Taliban limited themselves to “making noise,” seemingly trying to avoid serious civilian casualties.

Interpretations

What the Taliban present as efforts to limit the number of voters killed was often interpreted as Taliban weakness. The elders interviewed, who sometimes observed the electoral process from very close quarters, often came out with an impression of weakened Taliban who would not be able to directly attack the polling station:

Also I can tell you that Taliban became weak and Afghan Security Forces improved last time the Taliban physically attacked to the polling stations and fought face to face against of the Afghan forces, but this time they couldn't attack physically and couldn't fight face to face, this means that Taliban became weak. [Elder in Khogyani]

The sense of the Taliban having weakened and being unable to disrupt the electoral process regardless of their intentions appears to have been particularly strong in parts of the south, such as the surroundings of Kandahar city:

The Taliban couldn't stand against the Afghan Security Forces. The Taliban are not going to accept what elders tell them, I know because if there were any chance of their doing that, they would have done it in the past. The main reason the Taliban did not carry out attacks is the local police. The Taliban was suffering from presence of the local police. [Elder in Panjwai]

In other cases, however, the limited violence carried out by the Taliban was interpreted as the result of Taliban strength:

It's true that Taliban carried out fewer attacks, but because all the villages were under control of Taliban and Taliban didn't need to carry out attacks on the villages. They carried out fewer attacks only in the district center, but all the villages were prevented by Taliban from voting. It was a very bad election on the whole. [Elder in Jurm, Badakhshan]

These differing assessments derived from local perceptions of Taliban strength. In much of the south, the Taliban had little presence on the ground on election day, unlike the east, large parts of the Kabul region, and areas of the north and northeast most affected by Taliban activities.

Sources

To correctly assess the meaning and implications of Taliban violence during the electoral campaign, it is also important to understand that not all the violence surrounding the 2014 elections was attributable to the Taliban. Some areas saw armed confrontations between local strongmen (often members of parliament) supporting alternative presidential or provincial council candidates. One such episode occurred at the outskirts of Kabul city, in the Pul-i Charki area, during the first round of voting. One of the two main local strongmen, who also happened to be a member of parliament (MP), supported the candidacy of former foreign minister Zalmay

Not all the violence surrounding the 2014 elections was attributable to the Taliban. Some areas saw armed confrontations between local strongmen supporting alternative presidential or provincial council candidates.

Rasul and was present at the polling center early on the day of voting with his armed retinue—to protect the voters, they said, or to rig the vote, as their opponents claim. The police were allegedly bribed not to intervene. The heavily armed supporters of the other strongman, also an MP, who sided with Abdullah, arrived at the polling center shortly afterward and started skirmishing with their rivals with rocket launchers. The two sides also supported alternative candidates to the provincial council. The shooting was inconclusive (four militiamen were injured) but lasted two hours and put off voters. The local elders approached the two rivals and negotiated a settlement between them: The twelve thousand ballot papers left unused at the polling center would be divided equally between the two candidates and the fighting would stop. Local people confirmed that the shooting had taken place, but neither the media nor the authorities reported it.

The north saw friction between the supporters of Balkh Governor Atta Mohammad Noor, the main Jamiat-i-Islami party supporter of Abdullah, and local Ghani supporters, mostly Uzbeks linked to General Abdul Rashid Dostum, who joined the Ghani campaign as a vice presidential running mate. The latter, for example, accused Atta of trying to coerce non-Tajik voters in Balkh to support Abdullah and of having dispatched armed people to the villages for that purpose. In Balkh's Dawlatabad district, Dostum's men rearmed to push Atta's militia out. The violence kept people in their houses on election day. Dostum's men rationalized the intervention: "So we were in need to fill the boxes in favor of Ghani. If these Atta people did not attack, we would not fill the boxes."

Some also alleged that Atta's men were excluding Uzbeks, Turkmen, and Pashtuns from the polling stations. Tension was high, and fears were that for the second round more violence was likely because more people were being armed. A commander affiliated with Dostum explained:

For the second round of the elections, we armed [eight times more] people, and we will send these people to those areas where [there] are Pashtuns, Turkmen, and Uzbeks to prevent the people of Atta Mohammad Noor [one of the national leaders of Jamiat-i-Islami, Abdullah's party] from attacking again for the second round of election.

A source inside Atta's militia confirmed that Atta's men entered Dawlatabad with the intent of preventing Ghani from getting the local vote; they shot into the air and openly threatened voters, pretending to be Taliban. However, they alleged that Dostum's people were planning to fill the ballot boxes anyway. That the Taliban were showing a soft spot for Ghani also reportedly encouraged Atta's men to intervene, a commander affiliated with Atta Mohammad Noor related:

One reason for our attack is also that the Taliban did not want to do attacks in those areas where Ghani has votes and Taliban attacked in those areas where Abdullah has votes and in Tajik areas. Taliban were doing these things to favor the Pakistanis, so we started attacks.

Interestingly, in some areas, the Taliban unusually made no claims of having disrupted the elections, but elders reported nonetheless widespread "Taliban" activities that prevented the majority of the population from voting. This was, for example, the case of Tagab district in Badakhshan, which the Taliban did not even list among the areas where they were active against the electoral process, even if they have been present there for some time. The same applies to Jurm district, also in Badakhshan, an elder there recounted:

In Jurm district, the security situation was very bad during election day and still is, and all the villages were under the control of Taliban during the election and still are under control of the Taliban. During the election we only had four polling stations open in the entire district, and all these were in the district center. The villagers who were living in the villages of the district couldn't participate in the elections because of Taliban activities in their villages. In general I can tell you that our district had one of the worst elections in all Afghanistan.

The same applies to parts of Herat Province, an elder in Gulran said, where the suspicion was that local strongmen allied with the different candidates might be trying to prevent some villages from voting:

Taliban prevented more than 50 percent of the villages from voting, in fact there was fighting in those villages where polling stations were opened, and villagers told me that they didn't know whether Taliban did the fighting or these criminals like Arbab Gul Ahmad and other people who wanted to carry out fraud did the fighting. Because these people also create the situation that villagers don't come and they do fraud for their candidates...Villagers could not tell what was going on around their villages, and this is what these criminals wanted, to scare people and then do fraud.

Apart from these allegations, during the first round of voting in Herat, competition for the loyalty of the local Tajik population was the main source of friction between Ismail Khan (a former regional strongman and running mate to candidate Abdul Rasul Sayyaf) and supporters of Abdullah. In Chest-i Sharif, for example, Ismail Khan's supporters recount how an armed group loyal to a local supporter of Abdullah attacked them and took the ballot boxes away; the attackers outnumbered the defenders and scared them by shooting into the air. The two sides accused each other of intending to stuff the ballot boxes, but a source close to the Abdullah camp admitted that in the end they had managed to manipulate the voting process. It is worth noting that both sides admit to having been in control of the ballot boxes at one point or another (rather than the legitimate authorities).

In Wardak, an elder in Sayed Abad reported a conflict between local supporters of Zalmay Rasul and Abdullah over control of the ballot boxes:

I was informed that there were ballot boxes in the security checkpoints, and it caused fights between X, who was candidate of provincial council and was campaigning in favor of Zalmay Rasul, and Y, who was candidate to the provincial council too. There was fighting between these two people, and this fighting was because of stuffing ballot boxes. X was saying, "We have spent four hundred thousand dollars, so 80 percent of votes should be in favor of Zalmay Rasul in the presidential election and 80 percent votes should be in favor of myself in the provincial council." But Y, who is from Hizb-i Islami, claimed that "we did jihad against the Soviets and Taliban and we saved our country from them, so 80 percent of ballots should be in favor of me and Abdullah Abdullah."

In the south, friction between supporters of Ghani and supporters of Rasul occurred in some localities. In Kandahar's Daman district, supporters of Ghani linked to local powerbrokers clashed with supporters of Rasul, linked to a rival powerbroker. The latter accused the former of buying votes and thus justified their attempt to fill the ballot boxes. Five villages were prevented from voting by the shooting, even if no one was injured and all the shooting was in the air. The two contenders tried to negotiate a deal on the basis of a fifty-fifty sharing of the ballot papers, but the intervention of the local elders forced them to pull back and let the voters flow to the polls.

The active intervention of strongmen of various stripes in support of one or the other candidate would therefore seem to have been quite generalized, at least based on interview responses during the first round. It was not just strongmen, however, who were involved in coercing the voters. In Nangarhar, elders openly admitted that they first tried to convince villagers inclined toward candidates other than Ghani to switch to Ghani's side. Failing that, they then tried to coerce them, eventually collaborating with the Taliban by reporting to them which villages had to be blockaded. A local strongman loyal to Hazrat Ali (who supported Abdullah) and another loyal to Haji Zahir (who supported Ghani) fought in Khogyani over the elections, leaving one man killed and others injured. The two sides accused each other of trying to put pressure on the voters to vote for Ghani or Abdullah. Haji Zahir's people accused some elders of having sold their votes for Abdullah. Hazrat Ali's people (disapprovingly) and

the elders (mostly approvingly) indicated that Haji Zahir's men were closely cooperating with the Peshawar shura of the Taliban in trying to prevent people from voting for Abdullah.

People supporting Abdullah were not in the tribal shura, but village elders. Also some commanders wanted to support Abdullah for money. We tried to talk to commanders not to vote for Abdullah. We also met the Taliban, they asked us who will support Abdullah—we told them, they blocked the road and we asked them not to fight. [Elder in Nangarhar]

The strongmen themselves accused each other of trying to rig the vote, but their own description of events suggest that both might have been guilty:

We brought boxes to this area so that they would be safe from the Taliban, but when [Haji Zahir's men] understood that the Taliban did not do anything in these five villages, they attacked us and killed one of our guys and carried the boxes to their own areas and filled them in favor of Ghani....Zahir is very powerful, and he does not listen to any government person in this district and province. Only in one village the elections took place and Abdullah got the votes, but in the other four villages the boxes were taken by Zahir's people. [Strongman in Khogyani]

Why were the militiamen of this strongman moving boxes around and not the police? Clearly something was wrong in Khogyani. Allegations, from Haji Zahir's men, also circulated that the militiamen of Hazrat Ali impersonated Taliban on election day and fired shots in the air to prevent villages inclined to support Ghani from voting.

Accusations against local strongmen and men of influence abounded also in other parts of Nangarhar, where Hazrat Ali and Haji Zahir, once allied, are now at odds. Apart from Khogyani, another hot area was Dara-e Noor, Hazrat Ali's main stronghold. In Kama, it was MP Mirwais Yasini, allied with Abdullah, who was battling Haji Zahir and Ghani's supporters.

Most of the violence described here was relatively mild, such as shooting into the air, even if some gunmen were injured and a few even killed. There were other allegations, however, of worse violence, such as targeted killings. The most publicized incident was the killing of two of Abdullah's campaign workers in Herat city before the first round. Although some Taliban sources in Quetta claimed responsibility for the attack and asserted that the workers had been followers of military commander Abdul Qayum Zakir, Zakir's men in Herat said instead that they had been Ismail Khan supporters: "The two Abdullah campaigners who were killed in Herat Province were not killed by the Taliban. They were killed in fighting between Abdullah and Ismail Khan's people."

Because the attack occurred in Herat city, where the Taliban are rarely active, the latter hypothesis seems plausible. The Zakir group, in particular, mostly operated in the south of Herat Province and rarely around the city itself. A source close to Zakir in Quetta also acknowledged this: "We only attacked Abdullah's workers in Saripul Province, not in...Herat Province. The attack on Abdullah workers in Herat Province was done from Ismail Khan's side, not from Taliban side, according to the Naim group."

For the second round, as competition became stiffer, attempts to control the vote by various strongmen increased. One of the protagonists of the clashes in Khogyani mentioned the support he was receiving to strengthen his ability to defend his five villages:

For the second round of election we armed forty more men because Atta Mohammad Noor sent us money and we bought weapons with it, so now there are sixty armed people with us and we will not let Haji Zahir and Taliban do anything against us for the second round of election. We are really happy from such support of Atta Mohammad Noor.

The same tendency was reported by most of the strongmen interviewed for this project.

Taliban Policies for the 2014 Elections

The Taliban have long debated their options with regard to the 2014 elections.⁴ From the early stages, the possibility of supporting a presidential candidate for the first time was seriously discussed and in early 2013 even seemed to be likely. Several Taliban cadres now say that the intent, as least as far as the Peshawar shura was concerned, was to support Hamid Karzai's then chief of staff Omar Daudzai, who at that time seemed likely to be a candidate and to receive outgoing President Karzai's endorsement.⁵ Supported by some of the regional powers as well, Daudzai could then have become the "candidate of peace." To better intervene in the electoral process, the Taliban started setting up "electoral offices" at the central shura level as well as at the provincial and district level. They even started buying electoral cards to influence the vote. The process started in the Peshawar shura and was then imitated by the other shuras, though the Quetta shura was only able to set up its own network of electoral offices in early 2014. The new election commissars (*entekhabat-e massulin*) were to take over temporarily from the military leaders at the provincial and district level and to assume direct control over all the Taliban commanders on election day. This was meant to ensure that the plan developed by the leadership would be implemented in a disciplined way.

The failure to establish political negotiations between the Taliban, members of the Kabul government, and their respective international sponsors made reaching an agreement over the elections impossible. Daudzai in the end did not register as a candidate, and the Taliban started selling back the cards they had bought. Nonetheless, discussions among the Taliban over an electoral strategy continued. With the political talks stalled before they had even really begun, the appeal of a campaign of unmitigated violence was on the rise among the Taliban in early 2014. Not only the hard-liners wanted it, even those still inclined toward a negotiated solution with Washington or Kabul started feeling that showing the military power of the Taliban would provide leverage at the negotiating table. As of early March, the Taliban were ready for a massive campaign of disruption against the electoral process and announced their intention through a bellicose statement released on March 10:

The Islamic Emirate shall never allow the enemy to be successful in achieving its goals through this fake [*sic*] theatrical charade. In this regard we have given orders to all our Mujahideen to use all force at its disposal to disrupt these upcoming sham elections; target all its workers, activists, callers [*sic*], security apparatus, and offices, and the nation must also stop the process of elections from taking place in mosques, clinics, schools, *madaris* [seminaries], and other public places.⁶

The main constraint the Taliban faced at that point was that early April, the first round of voting, comes at the beginning of the Taliban fighting season. Most full-time fighters are usually still in Pakistan, which made it more difficult to unleash a successful campaign of disruption. Attempts were made in winter and early spring to lay the ground for a faster start of the fighting season, but they achieved modest results, in part because of the rough climate in the mountain areas where the Taliban spent the winter. Still, the general expectation among observers was that the Taliban would make intense efforts to hamper the electoral process ahead of the first round vote.

Debates in the Run-Up

Soon, however, other factors came into play that prevented the Taliban from aligning behind an anti-elections military campaign. In particular, a number of foreign sponsors of the Taliban started weighing in from mid-March onward and exercising pressure on the Taliban to place

selective pressure on the elections to favor specific candidates. According to interviews, the strongest pressure came from the Saudi government, which saw Abdullah as too close to Iran for comfort and feared that a large-scale campaign against the elections would keep mostly Pashtun voters away from the polls and favor Abdullah, whose constituencies were widely recognized to be mostly among Tajiks and Hazaras. At the time, the Saudis were observing Iranian successes in Syria (where Assad's regime was regaining ground on the battlefield) and in Iraq (where Nouri al-Maliki seemed likely to be reconfirmed as prime minister after the April parliamentary elections).⁷ Promises were also made for rewards if the Taliban complied with Saudi demands, including facilitation in future negotiations with the new president.

The news of such pressure rapidly spread among the middle-level cadres of the Taliban, and by May (when the interviews were carried out) it was common knowledge. In fact, very few Taliban interviewees failed to mention external pressure as a major factor in shaping the campaign. As discussed later in greater detail, Saudi Arabia was not the only source of external pressure on the Taliban.

Internally, tribal pressure also weighed on the Taliban.

Internally, however, tribal pressure also weighed on the Taliban. A leader of the Peshawar shura admitted that several tribal delegations visited Peshawar to lobby the Taliban to allow the elections to happen: Shinwari, Khogyani, Safi, Jabarkhel, Dawlatzai, and others. Although the leadership of the Peshawar shura claims to have rejected such approaches, one of its members admitted that

maybe there are some people in the Peshawar shura who did not want [Ashraf Ghani's] campaign to be damaged, these Taliban belong to some shuras like Safi shura, Shinwari shura, Mohmand shura, and other shuras which requested them not to attack Ghani's campaign....I also did not want to interfere in the plans of senior people because this would bring disunity among the Taliban....This decision was taken by some high-level people like provincial military leaders and others, but I cannot say that this came from the Peshawar shura leadership. We accept that there was this problem with these people.

For their part, the tribal elders were convinced that their lobbying of the Taliban was successful. That even among the leaders of the Peshawar shura there was some sympathy for Ghani certainly helped the elders' lobbying, given that some Taliban leaders were predisposed to consider favorably such requests:

I can say that there is a difference between Ghani and Abdullah. This is the difference, that Abdullah is the man of India and Westerners. He will divide the country. It is possible that if he becomes a president, there will be a lot of problems. He is a person who is talking against Taliban and Islam. But Ghani is better than Abdullah.

As a rule, the Taliban approached or were approached by tribal shuras, as opposed to village elders. During the interview process, it was noticeable how most village elders more or less everywhere were unaware of any desire of the Taliban as a whole to support specific presidential candidates, in contrast to tribal shura members. Still, several village elders noticed that local Taliban commanders had a soft spot for one or the other candidate, though the elders could not explain why. Even in some locations where the elders indicated that the Taliban prevented most villages from voting, like Andar (Ghazni), the elders believe the Taliban were less effective than in the past because of the presence of the Afghan Local Police. There was some recognition that, as an elder in Andar said, "If we take a look back, fewer activities of the Taliban against the election is not a sign of their weakness, but their minds have been changed due to popular uprisings, because the Taliban can stop people, but they didn't cut off anyone's finger."

In Quetta, too, local communities and tribal councils of the Barakzai, Ishaqzai, Hotak, Achakzai, Noorzai, Alokozai, Tokhi, Popolzai, and Alizai tribes, as well as VIPs from notable families of southern Afghanistan, such as Sher Mohammed Akhundzada and Hamid Karzai,

approached the Taliban to be allowed to vote. Most Quetta Taliban interviewed for this project insisted that the elders' lobbying had little impact. Some senior field cadres and elders, however, admitted that the pressure of the communities was a factor:

These tribal shuras told us that if you do attacks we will not support you in the future and we will not allow you to stay in the villages. This was the reason why we did not do attacks in the first round. [Taliban electoral cadre in Kandahar]

They contacted our leader Hamid Karzai and also other village elders, and they all accepted to talk with Taliban. Therefore, in the 2009 election the Taliban did a lot of attacks and many people were killed. We told them that whether you attack or not the elections will determine whether there will be a Pashtun president or not. [Associate of Karzai]

Some Taliban commanders also confirmed during the interviews that they accommodated the elders' requests and adopted a softer approach than the one demanded by their own leaders. Among the top leaders, only former aviation minister and Quetta shura chief Akhtar Mansur in Quetta, who had already decided not to wage the campaign against the elections, openly welcomed these approaches, according to some southern commanders and cadres based in Quetta. Mansur was the single most influential individual in Quetta at that point, so his position must have had a significant impact on the ground.

The Miran Shah shura was also approached by tribal elders. One senior source in that shura acknowledged that meetings with the tribal shuras of the Zazai, Mangal, Sabari, Tani, Mandozai, Ismail Khel, Totakhel, Zadran, and Ahmadzai tribes (Loya Paktia) took place but failed to get the elders to agree with the Miran Shah shura, which was the faction within the Taliban most opposed to allowing the election to happen. According to Taliban sources the elders even threatened to actively oppose the Taliban if their desire to get the people to vote was not met.

Internal First-Round Debate

As a result mainly of external pressure and perhaps also of tribal pressure, the divisions within the Taliban, which were just beginning to heal, opened wide again just before the first round. Not only were the three top shuras split over the approach to adopt, but there were divisions within them, except within the Miran Shah shura, which remained resolutely opposed to the elections.

The Quetta shura was divided in two main groups, one willing to give way to Saudi pressure to facilitate Zalmay Rasul's campaign, as well as inclined to use the electoral process as a bargaining tool to extract concessions from Kabul (the group led by Akhtar Mansur), and the other prone to wage jihad against the elections as the Taliban had done during previous elections (the group led by military commander Abdul Qayum Zakir). Zakir's followers thus justified their stand:

Q. Do you think that if the Taliban attack voters, there will be negative consequences for them, like people might not help them anymore in the villages?

A. This is not true, we did attacks against voters in 2009 and 2010, so why did villagers not do anything against us then? In any case, we are not afraid of villagers helping us or not. Because all the village elders know that this elections are not lawful. Whoever America wants to become the president, he will be the president.

Although the differences among the leaders were rather clear cut, the lines were more blurred among the rank and file. Among Mansur's people, for example, enthusiasm for supporting Rasul was far from universal: "There was pressure on us to favor Zalmay Rasul in Kandahar Province, it was not like we had any interest in him but there was foreign pressure on us to support Zalmay Rasul."

Among field commanders and cadres also, sympathy for Ashraf Ghani was widespread; one source aligned with Mansur placed the share at 30 percent. Moreover, Zakir's position had weakened by the spring of 2014 as three of his key allies within the military leadership (group leaders) started distancing themselves. Mullah Sattar shifted toward Mansur's alliance even before Zakir's sacking as head of the Military Commission in April 2014, shortly after the first round; Mullah Naim took a pro-Abdullah stand influenced by the Iranians, and Mullah Janan did not agree with Zakir's stand toward the elections.

The Miran Shah shura was unified around the Haqqani family and in favor of a military campaign against the elections, which included targeting voters. The Haqqanis have so far shown little interest in negotiating with anybody, except on matters such as prisoner exchanges.

The Peshawar shura came under Pakistani pressure to allow the vote in areas where Ashraf Ghani was believed to have widespread support. It decided to opt for a mild campaign of disruption, trying to avoid violence against voters and not disrupt voter turnout too much, at least in areas expected to support Ashraf Ghani. The real concern of the majority of the Peshawar shura's membership, which included the head of its electoral office, "Atiqullah", was not to favor Abdullah, whom they regarded as fundamentally hostile, as well as Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, who was also regarded as hostile.

However, a minority of the Peshawar shura were in favor of a full-fledged campaign of violence in line with the thinking of Zakir and the Haqqanis, who were not concerned with a possible Abdullah victory because they believed that it would increase support for the Taliban among Pashtuns. They also argued that softening the approach against the elections was doing no good to the Taliban. One commander in Jaghatu explained:

In the first round we did not do any attacks and the world and [the] Afghan government claim that the Taliban have become weak. So I told to my leaders that we must do attacks, if not our image will collapse. I do not know why they are not doing attacks, but I will continue my attacks. This is shameful for the Taliban and for Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. All the foreign Taliban like [the Pakistani Taliban], Chechens, Arabs, and [the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan] laugh on us and say that we are finished if our leaders are doing such things.

The Peshawar shura also allowed the candidate supported by Hizb-i Islami, Hilal, to campaign, by virtue of peace agreements with Hizb-i Islami and to avoid a renewal of the conflict with that organization. In this regard too, there was opposition within the ranks, and some interviewees stated clearly that they did not allow Hilal and Hizb-i Islami to campaign in their area because of the legacy of conflict between Taliban and Hizb.

First-Round Approaches

Each of the Taliban's components therefore marched into the elections with a different plan. Because of the overlap between the areas of operations of the different Taliban shuras, however, and because of divisions within the shuras of Quetta and Peshawar, implementing these plans coherently proved impossible. The military leadership of the Peshawar shura was mostly behind Atiqullah's plan to attack the IEC, the international observers, and some of the candidates' campaigners but to spare voters: "The voters are poor people, and they do not know about the issues. The real criminals are the candidates and the people who are working in the commission."

The justification for targeting the IEC and its staff, according to a Taliban electoral cadre in Nangarhar, was that "they are not loyal to Afghanistan and they take money from the Americans and the Westerners, they are not working independently."

Atiqullah's plan could be summarized as an effort to deploy a more targeted violent effort against the elections, avoiding the indiscriminate violence of which the Taliban are being increasingly accused. High-profile attacks were to be organized in Kabul to convey the message that the Taliban were still powerful and able to strike at will, lest anyone conclude that the lower level of violence was a result of Taliban weakness. A Taliban electoral cadre in Nangarhar explained:

We wanted to carry out attacks on the elections commission and on foreign observers like in Kabul Serena Restaurant; we had information that there were foreign observers in this restaurant. Our leaders told us that their killing is legal because they are not independent observers, they are the slaves of foreigners like Americans, Indians, Westerners, and they are given money.

Apart from the attack on the Serena hotel, the Taliban were also able to twice attack IEC facilities in Kabul. These were sufficiently high-profile attacks, though it is likely that the Taliban would have liked to do more and might have been prevented from doing so by tight security in Kabul.

Although the Taliban leadership did not advertise it, the plan also seems clearly to have featured an attempt to channel votes in a particular direction. Several Taliban cadres in the provinces indicated that at the beginning of 2014, with the help of sympathetic elders and mullahs, the Taliban surveyed the villages to establish the local orientation toward the candidates. Where it was decided to prevent people from voting the orders imparted to the field commanders were to block roads and intimidate voters rather than carry out direct violent attacks on voters. Several Taliban sources confirmed that the Peshawar shura meant to prevent only villages supportive of Abdullah from voting. Most Taliban commanders and cadres in the areas under the responsibility of the Peshawar shura confirmed having targeted the "bad villages" with their road closures. Elders in Khogyani also confirmed the same pattern of Taliban behavior. According to sources close to Ghani, his campaigners were negotiating with the Taliban in the east to get clearance for entering the rural areas.

The position advocated by Atiqullah and the majority of the Peshawar shura was resisted by "old Taliban" types, such as the president of the shura, Mawlawi Saleh, and Mohibullah, one of the deputies. Saleh is a largely ceremonial figure, mostly involved in fund-raising, and did not have the authority to impose his views over the rest of the shura. The hard-liners within the Peshawar shura instead tried to encourage field commanders to exceed the orders of the Peshawar shura leadership. Pakistani jihadist groups like the Pakistani Taliban (Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan), Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, which operate in many areas under Peshawar's responsibility and are closely linked to Saleh, also encouraged and paid Taliban commanders to carry out attacks, including against voters, and to blockade villages to prevent people from flocking to the polling stations. A Taliban commander in Achin explained how the hard-liners justified their disobedience:

It is told in Islam that when the father is telling something wrong you must not accept it, so if our election commission is telling something wrong to us, I still attack. Even if it tells us many times we will still carry out attacks on it because this is an unlawful election.

There seems to be some truth in the fact that the Pakistani Taliban were responsible for at least some of the unauthorized violence. The Taliban claimed an attack on Ghani's life in Kunar, which was not confirmed by other sources. Whether that happened or not, it is interesting that a source close to Zakir, having no reason to disclaim the attempt given his opposition to all candidates, indicated that the Pakistani Taliban were indeed responsible for the attack.

Still, it was not only Pakistani Taliban breaking the rules. Several district-level shadow electoral officers (five in Nangarhar, five in Faryab, two in Ghazni) and at least one provincial

officer (Parwan) were removed for failing to comply with the orders of Atiqullah. The divergent attitudes within the leadership, according to a Taliban electoral cadre in Nangarhar, led to friction on the ground:

Before the elections we had a meeting and all the commanders agreed with us [to refrain from attacking the elections], but some commanders did attack and we got the information that these commanders took money from TTP and Lashkar-e-Taiba. We arrested ten commanders and they are with our court; what they decide, we will implement.

In Shirin Tagab (Faryab), one elder pointed out that as far as he knew the only two villages that could not vote were Taliban-controlled Pashtun villages, which would seem to go against the Peshawar shura narrative of channeling the vote, unless those villages were believed to be inclined toward a candidate other than Ghani.

In addition, some of the numerous commanders loyal to the Quetta shura, operating in areas under the authority of the Peshawar shura, also often disobeyed the latter's orders and went on with attacks against voters. Commanders belonging to Zakir's network were in reality those most often accused of disobedience, in their case consisting of unauthorized violence: In Ghazni, they were disarmed by the Peshawar shura forces, and in Wardak, the whole Zakir group was at risk of being expelled from the province. In Sayed Abad (Wardak Province), for example, local elders alleged that local supporters of Zalmay Rasul collaborated with Quetta shura's Mansur to manipulate the vote in Rasul's favor.

As a result of this complex web of Taliban groupings and Pakistani allies, the military-political landscape of eastern Afghanistan did not look quite like Atiqullah might have desired. Violence in the east and around Kabul region was the highest in all of Afghanistan, although specific pockets of villages believed to support Dr. Abdullah were disproportionately affected, according to the Taliban and some local elders.

In places such as most of western Nangarhar Province, things did not look less violent in 2014 than they had been in 2009 and in fact looked worse given that the Taliban had been relatively weak in the area five years earlier. In several other areas, the local elders saw no evidence of a Taliban strategy to allow participation in the election, even selectively. One elder in Jaghatu (Wardak) commented, for example, that the Taliban's campaign against the elections in 2014 was particularly weak. In Sayed Abad, an elder explained,

The Taliban commanders cannot be sympathetic to any candidates. A few weeks ago, they had meeting in Mehru village. The meeting was held in a forest. They invited us for meeting and hundreds [of] people attended. They told us that it is not an election, but this is a drama of America, the people who are candidates in the elections are actually their servants, and they cannot do anything but give democracy slogans which were given by the Americans to them.

The picture was quite patchy, because even in areas where the Peshawar shura hard-liners had the most impact, some commanders supported the approach of the majority of the Peshawar shura. As an elder in Shirzad explained,

Yes, some of the Taliban have respect for the election process, and they want the elections to take place properly. Like Mullah H and Mullah AA, as I heard from many people that these two commanders asked secretly some people and villagers to participate in the election. But the high-level commanders of Taliban in our district are from outside the district and from Pakistan and these two commanders cannot do anything.

Making the picture even patchier was that in some areas allegations persisted that local Taliban were making local deals with provincial council candidates and supporters of presidential candidates on the basis of personal relations, in some cases even when the candidate was Abdullah. Cases were reported in Andar, for example, and Dih Yak (Ghazni): "I have some reports that some candidates of the provincial council in Ghazni including our district

had contacts with Taliban and still have contacts with Taliban, and I believe that some of the provincial candidates with support of the Taliban, carried out large-scale fraud.”

Some Taliban interviewees openly admitted to reporting inflated figures about the number of attacks carried out to their superiors because they did not want to prevent local communities from voting. Others also admitted having behaved more violently than ordered by the leadership, for example killing voters and then failing to report the loss of life to their superiors (in Hissarak, for example). Some Taliban commanders even resigned from the Taliban with their fighters over this new ‘softness’ (two cases were reported in Nangarhar, four in Faryab). Some hard-line Taliban went as far as carrying out high-profile attacks against the orders of the Peshawar shura, as an elder in Qaysar explained:

We had only one attack on supporters of Ghani. They wanted to attend the campaign of Ghani in Maimana city, but their convoy was ambushed by Taliban on the Qaisar-Maimana road, so that one woman was killed and five others wounded. And, one week ago, the caravan of Naqibullah Faye, “The Head of Health Commission in Parliament,” and one of the senior members of Ghani’s campaign were attacked by Taliban in two points on the Qaisar road near Almar market.

Overall, however, among the rank and file, the negative attitude toward the elections in principle, which was largely prevalent in 2009 when it was encouraged by the leadership, appeared to be much less common as of May 2014.

In the south, within the Quetta shura, Zakir and his shrinking alliance tried their best to sabotage the electoral effort, but Mansur and his coalition of networks largely abstained from violence. Zakir’s determination to go against the will of influential external powers, as discussed, eventually cost him his job as head of the national Military Commission after the first round of voting in April. A number of his supporters among the Taliban’s electoral commissars were sacked (at least four in Herat and six in Kandahar). Zakir and his men continued to operate as one of several Taliban *mahaz* (fronts or fighting groups) based in Quetta. On the whole, at least two-thirds of the Quetta shura’s available military force was not committed to the campaign against the elections. As in Peshawar, the dividing lines among the rank and file were much more blurred than among the leaders. A Taliban commander in Maruf elaborated:

Our mahaz leader also told us not to let the elections happen and to attack the elections secretly, so that the election provincial commissar [loyal to Akhtar Mansur] must not be aware about the attacks. I did not listen to my mahaz leader; I did not do any attack. I listened to the electoral commissar and let people vote. I did not want the votes of Pashtuns to be reduced, and I decided to let people choose their president. Therefore, I can say there were different ideas among the Taliban: Some were attacking, some were not attacking. For some there were orders to attack, but their commander were not carrying out attacks, like me, but there were some who had orders not to attack and instead they were doing attacks.

Some elders alleged that around Kandahar some local Taliban commanders were also sympathetic to former governor Gul Agha Shirzai, a candidate in the first round.

Only the Miran Shah shura campaigned against the electoral process without internal divisions at the leadership level. Interestingly, Sirajuddin Haqqani of the Miran Shah shura adopted the same position as Zakir in favor of attacks on the process, but contrary to Zakir he was not “punished” for his stance. In Paktia, one cadre of the Miran Shah shura explained the rationale of his personal opposition to allowing local people vote:

For the Miran Shah shura too, it is better if Abdullah wins the elections because all the people will stand against the government, especially Pashtuns, and they will join us and they will stand with us against the government, and so we will be able to overthrow this government.

However, the shura’s presence on the ground in early April was limited because of snow on the mountain passes and of the lack of any effort to better equip its fighters for the winter

Some Taliban interviewees openly admitted to reporting inflated figures about the number of attacks carried out to their superiors...Others also admitted having behaved more violently than ordered by the leadership.

(contrary to what the Peshawar shura did). Moreover, it appears that in practice even the Miran Shah shura rarely tried to challenge the will of the tribal leadership to have elections running, despite having formally rejected the approach of the tribal elders. One field commander of the Miran shah shura indicated that despite formal orders to push ahead with the campaign against the electoral process, little enthusiasm among the leaders was apparent: “I think they did not show interest in carrying out attacks against the election; there might be pressure on the Miran Shah shura from the Pakistani authorities.”

Moreover, Taliban sources in Paktia suggested that a minority of field commanders of the Miran Shah shura favored Ghani and tried to have as little impact as possible on voter turnout. Indeed, in Sayed Karam, one such commander explained his reasons:

Qari X is Election Massul of Sayed Karam District, and he ordered us not to allow the elections and carry out attacks against them. I did not listen to him, and I did not create any problems for the voters, and I did not attack voters, candidates, and electoral commission because the people requested me not to, and they said, “Let us to take part in the election and choose Ashraf Ghani to become the president”... Even I gave my vote to Ashraf Ghani in the first round of the election.

Sources also indicate that even some cadres of the Miran Shah shura, like shadow governors, were also disinclined to wage the campaign of violence. Overall, therefore, the Miran Shah shura’s campaign was running slower than in 2009, when the elections took place during the summer and the Taliban military machine was running at full speed and the Haqqanis’ fighters and commander were in little doubt about the strategy to adopt.

The growing influence of the Iranians over portions of the Taliban reportedly had an impact in western Afghanistan, which is supposedly under the loose influence of the Quetta shura. Here many Taliban followed Iran’s “advice” to facilitate Abdullah’s campaign of Abdullah, albeit reluctantly, as a Taliban commander in Pashtun Zarghun explained: “I myself did not favor any candidates, but our network was favoring Abdullah because all our support is from Iran and we do not want our relationship to be damaged.”

Throughout the west, only some groups loyal to Zakir carried out attacks, and other groups loyal to Mansur also abstained from violence for their own reasons, as discussed with regard to the Quetta shura. Unconfirmed reports related that in the Koshk Kohna district of Herat armed clashes occurred between two groups of Taliban, one trying to disrupt the elections and the other trying to allow the villagers to vote.

Calculations on Candidates

Overall, the sample of twenty-three cadres and local commanders in eight provinces belonging to all of the three shuras showed that ten had sympathy for Ghani, seven were hostile to all candidates, four were indifferent to the candidates, and one supported Rasul or Abdullah (two did not answer). The main driver of Taliban sympathy for Ghani appears to have been ethnic and to prevent the inauguration of a “Tajik” president (the Taliban dismiss Abdullah’s claim of having a mixed Tajik-Pashtun background). Throughout the Taliban’s ranks, many commanders and cadres among those interviewed did not hide the fact that their sympathy for Ghani vis-à-vis Abdullah derives from the fact that Ghani is a Pashtun like them: “Why would we want to decrease Pashtun votes, and why would we make a Persian become the president of Pashtuns. We are against the Afghan government, but we are not against our fellow Pashtuns.

There are many other Taliban like me who did not want to attack Ashraf Ghani's campaign and his people."

Although the Quetta shura has few non-Pashtun fighters and was therefore unconcerned about ethnic backlash, some leaders of the Peshawar shura were apprehensive that supporting Ghani against Abdullah would not be appreciated by Tajik and Hazara Taliban, who, though few in number compared with Pashtuns, play an important strategic role for Peshawar in northern and central Afghanistan. Hence the decision not to take a clear stand in Ghani's favor, as discussed, but rather to rely on the election commissars to discreetly steer Taliban actions toward de facto favoring Ghani's campaign.

In practice, the election commissars were not always subtle in their approach to the ethnic issue. A high-level Taliban source in Ghazni indicated that of 102 villages blockaded by the Peshawar shura Taliban during the elections (a few more were blockaded by Quetta shura Taliban, also present in Ghazni), only ten were Pashtun, who voted mostly for Ghani, and the others all Hazara and Tajik, who overwhelmingly voted for Abdullah. One elder from the Hazara-populated district of Nawur confirmed attempts to prevent voting in villages situated in areas bordering Jaghatu. More than that, the provincial Taliban leadership transferred all senior Tajik Taliban out of Ghazni—quite a few Tajik Taliban are near the provincial capital—and replaced them with Pashtuns to ensure that the Taliban ban on Tajik village voting was respected.

Ethnic bias did not affect only Pashtun Taliban. It also applied to a number of Uzbek Taliban, attracted to Ghani's ticket by the presence of Abdul Rashid Dostum as his deputy. A Taliban commander in Dawlatabad explained: "I want Ashraf Ghani to become a president because his first deputy is one of our Uzbeks. I do not want the votes of Rashid Dostum to be reduced."

The minority of Tajik Taliban seemed irritated by what they perceived as the ethnic bias of their leadership. In Faryab, all the Taliban commanders quitting or threatening to quit over Taliban behavior during the elections were Tajiks. In western and northeastern Afghanistan, Tajik Taliban largely refused to disrupt Abdullah's campaign and may even have contributed to it, as a commander in Badakhshan related:

The Peshawar shura ordered that in those areas where Ghani has votes we must not create problems, but in those areas where Abdullah or other candidates have votes we must prevent the elections. They were making a difference between Pashtun and Tajik, so I did not do any attacks because I am Tajik. I did not want to create problems in X District of Badakhshan province. The commissioner of X District presented his resignation to our network leader. He said that our leaders are telling to us to create problems here, but they do not make problems in Pashtun areas. There were also other members of our mahaz who did not do attacks, and we let people participate in the election.

The desire to prevent the election of a Tajik president was so strong that the presence alongside Ghani of Abdul Rashid Dostum, traditionally a *bête noire* of Pashtuns, was largely ignored. Only a few Taliban leaning toward hard-line positions raised the issue: "They are supporting Ghani because he is Pashtun, but they are against Abdullah because he is Tajik. They do not see that Ghani's first deputy is Rashid Dostum, who killed seven thousand Taliban in one day, so I am attacking his campaign and I am not supporting him."

Indeed hard-line Taliban appeared to be the only ones exempt from this ethnic bias. In their ideological view, ethnic issues should be irrelevant to the jihad. Pashtun elders, on the other hand, agreed with the new, explicitly pro-Pashtun stand of the Taliban. As one elder said, Pashtuns after all have the right to rule Afghanistan because they are "70 percent of the population."

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Taliban Plans for the Second Round

The Taliban appear to have been surprised by the high support Abdullah received during the first round, 45 percent according to the official tally. By mid-April, they knew that in the event of a similar pattern in the second round, Abdullah would almost certainly win. So did the regional powers, which had been exerting pressure on the Taliban even before the second round. Taliban sources indicate that the Saudis and the Pakistanis converged toward asking the Taliban to facilitate the victory of Ashraf Ghani in the second round by allowing as many Pashtun voters to participate as possible.⁸ Discussions were also held about what measures could be taken to restrain the Pakistani jihadist groups from carrying out indiscriminate violence along the Pakistan border. The Iranians, by contrast, insisted that their allies among the Taliban should do as much as possible to disrupt the elections, but the majority of those allies reportedly answered that pressure from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan was overwhelming and could not be resisted.⁹ Tribal pressure on the Taliban in the east and southeast also mounted to allow the vote. However, several Taliban commanders and cadres saw it differently:

In the first round, the number of attacks was low and they claimed that the Taliban are weak and they are defeated. If we do not do attacks in the second round, we will be shown to be weak not only to the Afghan government and America but to the whole world.

In the first round the Afghan government and the Americans and Westerners said that the Taliban are weak and they have been defeated, but we will show our power to them in the second round.

Taliban Debates

The Peshawar shura, whose members often sympathized with Ghani, became inclined to abandon the ambiguity that characterized their stand before the first round and make sure that as many Pashtun voters as possible could go to the polling stations, in the expectation that they would now overwhelmingly support Ghani. The Peshawar shura leaders reportedly sent emissaries to meet Ghani's representatives. By contrast, the Peshawar shura planned an even greater effort than during the first round to blockade areas expected to support Abdullah, such as the Pashai-populated Dara-i Noor in Nangarhar or most of the Tajik-populated northern and northeastern Afghanistan. In these areas, even the ban on attacking voters was revoked. Initially, it was planned that attacks against the IEC and the security forces would intensify, according to the Peshawar Electoral Commission. Abdullah, however, was seen as the ultimate enemy:

There is much difference for Taliban between Abdullah and Ghani. Ghani is Pashtun, and he did not participate in the fighting and he did not kill any people. He did not have any opposition against the Taliban, and he may give chance for Taliban to join the government. But Abdullah is against Taliban, and he is the person who has killed seventy-five thousand people in Kabul. He is the slave of America, India, Westerners, Russia, what country is coming he is the slave of that. If he becomes the president, it would be easier to win the war because the number of Taliban will increase and all Pashtun will be against his government, but we do not want this, we want a Pashtun to be the president. If America and the West make Abdullah the president, this will be their big mistake; his government will be only in north, not in the east, west, and south. [Taliban electoral cadre in Nangarhar]

First, Abdullah is the person with whom we fought for six years in Shamali. Another is that he is Tajik. He promised to the Indians that we will finish the Taliban. He promised Pakistan that we will sign for the Durand Line to become [the] permanent border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. He wants to separate Pashtuns between two countries. He is also telling to America that he will sign the strategic contract between Afghanistan and the United States [the Bilateral Security Agreement]. He is really against Pashtuns. Ashraf Ghani is Pashtun. He is not the seller of Afghanistan. He is not against Taliban. [Taliban commander in Hissarak]

On May 19 through May 21, a big meeting of Peshawar shura leaders and cadres and foreign donors was held in Pakistan to negotiate a common policy for the second round. The head of the shura, Abdul Saleh, and his deputy Mohibullah, who had previously been opposed to the shura's relatively soft approach, particularly toward Ghani, now supported the suspension of any hostility that could damage Ghani's chances during the second round. It was decided during the meeting that, to maximize voter turnout, attacks against IEC staff would also be banned (contrary to what planned shortly after the first round). This shift seems to have implicitly recognized that the Taliban's first-round approach had affected voter turnout more than planned or even reported, including in ways that did not further the Peshawar shura's aims.

During the May meeting, the shura leadership conceded that Saudi and Pakistani pressure could not be ignored. The Saudi government representative at the meeting indicated that contacts with Ashraf Ghani had taken place and Ghani had agreed to open discussions with the Peshawar shura after his election, as well as to visit Saudi Arabia shortly after taking over the presidency. At the same time, pressure on Pakistani jihadist groups to abstain from carrying out attacks against the electoral process also increased dramatically. The Peshawar shura moved into the second round unified at least at the level of the leadership.

By contrast, the Quetta shura had its chance of finding a new unity in opposition of the electoral process after Zakir ceased being seen as a major threat by his rivals and Zalmay Rasul, the favorite candidate of Akhtar Mansur and of the Saudis, was left out of the race. The Peshawar shura also put pressure on Quetta to align behind Ghani. Ghani needed a much higher Pashtun participation in the vote to be able to catch up with Abdullah because of the 14 percent gap—45 percent Abdullah to 31 percent Ghani—in the first round. Under pressure from the Saudis and the Pakistanis, the Quetta shura issued orders to its field commanders to stay put for the second round as well, despite internal debates that seemed to be leaning toward a violent boycott. Within the Quetta shura were fears that a Ghani presidency might reduce their role in any negotiating effort, in that it would lean toward Peshawar, thanks to the mediation of the eastern tribal shuras.

Sources close to Zakir indicate that he and his few remaining allies were committed to renewing the campaign against the elections regardless of what foreign sponsors or the rest of the Quetta shura might argue. However, Zakir was reportedly in hiding and increasingly isolated. Although the Quetta shura was not quite as strong in southern Afghanistan as in 2009, it had regained some ground in 2013 over its low ebb of 2011 and 2012, particularly in Helmand. It could have been able to keep away from the polls a substantial number of potential supporters of Ghani.

The Miran Shah shura was also inclined toward sabotaging the second round of the elections, potentially harming Ghani's chances of success significantly. A senior Taliban cadre in Miran Shah, for example, said, "I told the political people of the Peshawar shura and Quetta shura that if we did not do attacks on election, the foreign people, Americans and Westerners, will say that the Taliban are weak. That very thing happened."

Given its uncompromising record and strong commitment to jihad, it showed little interest in tactical concessions in exchange for potential rewards of some kind. Another Miran Shah leader explained it this way: "It is better if Abdullah becomes the president, because now 10 percent of Pashtuns are against this government, but when Abdullah becomes the president 90 percent will be against this government."

Nonetheless, Miran Shah was also vulnerable to the pressure of some of its foreign sponsors, none of which would be happy to see Abdullah triumph. As in the first round, the Miran

Shah shura remained committed to a campaign of disruption but did little to implement it on the ground, even if it was going to have more full-time fighters on the ground in June than in early April. It might be that the Haqqanis in the end decided either not to antagonize the Saudis or not to antagonize the tribal leaders, but without openly admitting to either.

The Second Round

After the second round, the Taliban claimed to have carried out 805 attacks against the electoral process. This was a 26 percent drop on the level of violence claimed during the first round. There were no high-profile attacks at all before the second round and no significant attacks against electoral workers or candidate's campaigners. The main incident during the second round in Herat Province involved eight voters who had their fingers cut off. The Taliban leadership denied and attributed this incident to Abdullah's followers. Afghan government authorities reported having killed the Taliban commander responsible for the attack. On the whole, however, the Taliban were even quieter during the second round, confirming that the leadership level debates had had an impact, even if again the Taliban could not restrain all their commanders or force them to follow the leadership's plan. At the time of writing, it was too early to assess the reaction of the Taliban rank and file to the further softening of the Taliban's approach. The Taliban's leaders gambled that if they gave Ghani a hand, he would become president and there would have been reward for them after that, including promises of additional funding by some of their foreign sponsors, but also the reopening of the negotiating track.

Ghani managed to come on top of Abdullah in the second round, according to preliminary unaudited results. The Taliban's posture certainly contributed to that result, even if it was not the only factor propelling Ghani to the top position. Even if the audit changes that, for the Taliban this preliminary result was a success because any change could be put down to international interference and vindicate Taliban claims that the elections were being manipulated by foreigners. The leadership will now need to show concrete gains from their strategic decision to side with Ghani or could face a major backlash from their own men. Some backlash is likely in any case.

Implications of Taliban Policies and Actions

How the Taliban behaved during the elections has a number of implications for postelection Afghanistan.

Deepened Internal Divisions

The first obvious consideration is that the elections have been deeply divisive for the Taliban. The Taliban appear to have been crucially weakened by the lack of a functioning overall leadership able to reconcile differences between their component parts. In some cases, this friction between components turned violent, as a Taliban commander in Adraskan explained:

We did attacks and only Zakir's network was against the elections, but the remaining networks were in favor of elections such as Mansur's, Abdul Raziq's, Abdul Matin's, and Naim mahaz... They were doing negative propaganda against our network. They were telling people, "We are Afghan Taliban and we do not want to fight against the elections," and they pointed at us as if we were Pakistani Taliban. They gave weapons to the people to use against us. Therefore, there were fewer attacks against the elections.

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Some Taliban commanders have reportedly resigned because of the perception that their leadership was going soft, as mentioned. A by-product of the electoral campaign as it shaped up was indeed some polarization within the Taliban between hard-liners and pragmatists. Zakir's status among the Taliban's hard-liners has strengthened, and there are reports of defections to his network from several other networks. It is not clear, however, whether Zakir will be able to pay for new recruits flocking to the ranks of his network.

Doubts About Taliban Reforms

Another implication is that the success of the Peshawar shura in exporting its model of organization for handling the elections was only temporary. The electoral commission was seen as a failure in the aftermath of the first round, as Taliban indiscipline reached new peaks, as interviewees in Kandahar, Jaghatu, and Herat explained:

This commission did not give good result, and there is the possibility that this commission will be disbanded. What we wanted, did not happen.

This commission which was opened in the three shuras was not for helping Taliban, this was in the interest of foreign countries which wanted to support their own candidates. Therefore they opened this office.

In 2009 and 2010, the Taliban were active but there was some disorganization, so this time they wanted the Taliban to be more active. Unfortunately these offices were not as successful as we thought. The disorganization [in 2014] was greater than in 2009 and 2010.

Greater Taliban Pragmatism

Broader implications are also significant. Even Taliban hard-liners admitted that opposition to the elections in principle was not as widespread among the Taliban as it had been in 2009. A commander in Achin observed that "In the 2009 and 2010 elections, 90 percent of the Taliban were against election and 10 percent were not against, but this year 70 percent Taliban are not against elections and 30 percent are against election. We can say there is [a] big difference compared to the past." Another, in Jalrez, remarked, "I can say in Jalrez 60 percent of the Taliban did not want to do attacks. 40 percent wanted to attack, but they were not able to do it because Nizami Massoul did not want to let them. They did some attacks secretly and gave the responsibility to the Pakistani Taliban." One in Dawlatabad said much the same: "In Faryab Province, most of the commanders who were following the election commission, but 25 percent were against, and what they wanted, they did it."

Indeed, some elders indicated how their relations with the Taliban improved during the electoral campaign and how they started cooperating with them. By supporting Ghani in communities that were already largely pro-Ghani, or at least whose elders were, the Taliban made new friends or consolidated relations in a way that may have important political implications for the future. In the event of Abdullah's victory, a Khogyani elder in Nangarhar said, "We will be making problems, helping the Taliban, some of us will join the Taliban, and we would agitate against the government."

Even those elders who did not agree that the Taliban were supporting Ghani saw him as the only chance of restarting the negotiating process: "If Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai wins the election, I think there might be possibility of negotiation with Taliban, because first he is a Pashtun president and he is very clever, and I am sure he will bring Taliban in the negotiation table."

Possible Approaches to a Ghani Presidency

Concerning future developments, views among the Taliban who wanted to see Ghani become president were not uniform. Some only wanted to keep Abdullah away from the presidency, and others hoped that a Ghani presidency would open the door to successful negotiations. A commander in Jalrez put it this way: “In my view, after the elections there will be serious fighting if Abdullah becomes the president. But if Ashraf Ghani becomes the president, there will be fighting but not much. There is also the possibility of peace.”

Indeed, substantial constituencies within the Taliban seemed to consider the possibility of negotiating with Kabul, a key aspect of their planning. Most interviewees mentioned this openly; if the Taliban were not interested in negotiations, they would have been more interested in favoring Abdullah’s victory, as at least the hard-liners were. Despite the freeze in negotiations before the elections, Ghani’s victory was often described by the Taliban as a prelude to a resumption of diplomatic contacts. Interestingly, mainstream Peshawar shura Taliban described Ghani as someone not only not involved in the civil war of the 1990s (true) but also as someone not close to the United States and not engaged on the government side in this conflict (definitely not true). Dostum’s role as vice presidential candidate was either ignored or dismissed with the statement that Ghani would be able to control him. The hard-liners, by contrast, rejected Ghani as an acceptable candidate, highlighting the presence of Dostum on the ticket, Ghani’s reputation of being close to Washington as well as his readiness to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement, and the fact that Ghani’s wife and children are Christian. Overall, it would appear that among the Peshawar shura leadership there was some determination to sell Ghani as a viable negotiating partner to the rank and file:

It is impossible to negotiate with the president in the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan. If Ashraf Ghani becomes the president, there is a 50 percent possibility that he will accept our conditions. But if Abdullah reaches to presidency there is 0 percent chance that we will negotiate with him.

It is impossible to say on the basis of available information whether the Taliban’s posturing for negotiations indicates a genuine desire for a political settlement or instead merely a form of competition for the political leadership of the Taliban. The Taliban leaders who are advertising their willingness to negotiate and might develop contacts with foreign diplomats would also be obvious candidates for leading a Taliban government in the event of a Taliban victory, in which many Taliban continue to believe. Even a purely Taliban government would need to engage with the rest of the world, and individuals with a profile of moderates would be best positioned to undertake such engagements.

Conclusion

The Taliban’s involvement in electoral politics has so far brought them more sorrows than success. Their sudden change of policy, decided just before the second round of the elections, followed at least another major policy change in 2013, when they dropped plans for manipulating the electoral process. In the absence of a unified leadership above the level of the three main shuras, the Taliban did not have the ability to take decisions quickly and in a coordinated fashion. Although they had seemed to converge toward a common choice of aggressively disrupting the electoral process until just after March 10, when their bellicose statement was released, the new situation created by external pressure on them led to their moving into their electoral “campaign” in short order. This damaged their image not only because it highlighted differences among them but also because the failure to follow up on harsh statements led many observers to assume that the

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Taliban were weakening. Moreover, the lack of time for working out a common strategy led to serious divisions within the Taliban, compounding an existing trend of a gradual cracking in the Taliban's cohesiveness.

The problem was not just that the three shuras each adopted a different approach to the elections, each also showed important internal divisions. In Quetta and Peshawar, the leadership itself was divided, even if a majority was in favor of not disrupting the electoral process (Quetta) or disrupting it as mildly as possible without losing face (Peshawar). Only in Miran Shah was leadership united in deciding to go ahead with the campaign against the elections, but (not unlike Peshawar) it did not really push the campaign hard, faced as it was with very strong tribal support for Ghani. The Taliban rank and file were confused by the repeated changes in strategy and felt in many cases that the ideological purity of the movement was being sacrificed on the altar of political compromise. Still, a majority of Taliban field commanders and cadres appears to have been ready to follow the majority of the leadership and manipulate the electoral process as opposed to merely sabotage it.

The Taliban's new approach implied a greater capacity than previously demonstrated to exercise their coercive power in a discriminate way. For this purpose, by March 2014 all three shuras had established electoral commissions with branches in the provinces. Their senior cadres were to steer the campaign against the elections wherever the leadership wanted. In practice, although the campaign against the elections was not a complete failure, it was quite messy, and command and control on the Taliban side failed in many cases. That many of these electoral commissars had to be replaced is both a sign of organizational weakness (they did not follow the orders) and of strength (the leadership had enough authority to replace them). The new system originated in Peshawar and then exported to the other shuras was in any case clearly under strain; a significant minority of the commanders managed to disobey the orders of the top leaders and, despite some disciplining, most got away with it.

The Taliban might have overreached. Their sin was overconfidence and not only because the electoral commissions fell short of expectations. The Taliban failed to take into account the importance of ethnic politics within their ranks. Once the sometimes thin layer of jihadi politics was removed and pragmatic politics rehabilitated, many Taliban cadres and commanders started openly drifting toward ethnic politics, which the leadership had previously always tried to avoid. This created serious friction with non-Pashtun Taliban, whose strategic importance is much greater than their limited numbers.

The data available for the first round suggests that the Taliban's campaign was indeed less violent than previous ones. For once, it might be that the Taliban leadership underestimated the extent to which its men prevented voters from getting to the polls, but the violence was to an extent better targeted than in the past—comparatively few voters were hurt, despite a lot of shooting. Still, it was not carefully targeted to deliver a strong or clear message of Taliban intentions and capabilities, which was the purpose of the campaign. That some Taliban commanders continued to deliberately murder voters prevented the Taliban from making significant gains in terms of image.

Despite the muddled campaign, the Taliban were, as of May 2014, reasonably hopeful that something might still be gained from their decision to soften their attitude. The relationship with most Pashtun tribal shuras, traditionally not particularly good, was improving in that the Taliban in the end delivered what the shuras wanted—a boost to Ashraf Ghani's campaign. If the Taliban are able in the coming months and years to build on these improved relations, their influence inside Afghanistan could greatly strengthen.

The other potential gain derived from the strategic shift is that future negotiations could be greatly facilitated by Ghani's victory—if it withstands the vote audit. Ghani will owe something to the Taliban and much more to the tribal shuras, which mediated between him and the Taliban. It could be a unique opportunity for relaunching long-stalled diplomatic contacts. Within the Taliban, the Peshawar shura would be most likely to benefit from Ghani's opening.

Regardless of a diplomatic breakthrough, the Taliban may have entered a path that takes them closer to Afghan mainstream politics, which for the most part is not derived from liberal and democratic principles but is instead a matter of strongmen, manipulation, and corrupt patronage networks. Even after more than a decade of internationally backed statebuilding efforts, in 2014 the local strongmen were actively involved in rigging the vote and intimidating voters for several candidates during the 2014 elections. Seen from this perspective, the Taliban's interference in the election does not appear as extreme. As the Taliban have considerable coercive power at their disposal, it might well be that in 2015, when parliamentary elections are due, they will be courted by many actors, anxious to have Taliban commanders on their side in the competition to control the vote.

Notes

1. Antonio Giustozzi, "The Taliban and the 2014 Elections in Afghanistan," Peaceworks report no. 94 (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, April 2014), <http://www.usip.org/publications/the-taliban-and-the-2014-elections-in-afghanistan>.
2. Joshua Partlow, "Violence Data Show Spike during Afghan Presidential Election," *Washington Post*, April 14, 2014.
3. These are new districts which are seeking recognition by the Kabul government but have not been granted administrative status yet.
4. Giustozzi, "The Taliban and the 2014 Elections."
5. Daudzai has been a close collaborator of President Karzai for several years, serving as his chief of staff and minister of interior, as well as ambassador to Iran and Pakistan. He was previously linked to Hizb-i Islami and hails from Kabul Province.
6. Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, "Notification of Islamic Emirate Regarding the Upcoming Elections," March 10, 2014, <http://shahamat-english.com/index.php/paighamooona/42887-notification-of-islamic-emirate-regarding-the-upcoming-elections>.
7. See Simon Henderson, "The Battle for Iraq Is a Saudi War on Iran," *Foreign Policy*, June 12, 2014; Benedetta Berti and Yoel Guzansky, "The Syrian Crisis and the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry," Foreign Policy Research Institute E-notes, October 2012; Curtis Ryan, "The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria," *Middle East Report* 262 (Spring 2012).
8. Although Pakistani support for Ghani might appear counterintuitive and at odds with the presence of many Pashtun nationalists around him, it can be explained with the increasingly determined Saudi pressure on Islamabad and with the latter dependence on Saudi cash.
9. Iran has been developing contacts and alliances with selected groups of Taliban from 2005 onwards. As of mid-2014, these contacts were mostly concentrated in the Quetta shura.



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The controversial 2014 presidential election in Afghanistan has yielded several instant narratives that together paint a hugely confusing picture of what actually happened—its political effect in the second-round results, the deal brokered by U.S. secretary of state John Kerry, and the initiation of a technically and logistically complex audit. In the end, the election proved a contest of narratives as well as a contest of votes. The Taliban's involvement in the process and how it is emerging in the wake of the vote are significant to the future of Afghanistan. Is ethnicity becoming as consequential as ideology? Is the Taliban moving closer to mainstream Afghan politics? Is becoming more pragmatic than idealistic, more peaceful and less violent? Or is it Afghan politics that is moving closer to the Taliban and armed politics? This report explores the Taliban's telling lack of any accepted overall leadership, its loose federative structure, its splintering into three primary and often divergent divisions, its internal debates regarding the election, and its possible negotiations with the new government in Kabul.

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