



Center for Strategic & Regional Studies

Kabul

Weekly Analysis-Issue Number 270 (Oct 6-13, 2018)

Weekly Analysis is one of CSRS' publications, which significantly analyses weekly economic and political events in Afghanistan and the region. The prime motive behind this is to provide strategic insights and policy solutions to decision-making institutions and individuals in order to help them to design best policies. Weekly Analysis is published in local languages (Pashto and Dari) and international languages (English and Arabic).

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Preface

In the past few years, efforts have been made in Afghanistan both for fighting the Taliban as well as initiating peace talks with them. The Afghan government has struggled on a national, regional and international level to bring the Taliban to the negotiation table. The Taliban have vetoed the peace talks with Afghan government and have stressed on having talks with the United States only. At first, the United States was not ready to have talks with the Taliban, however, lately it seems to have accepted the demand of the Taliban as the war continues.

Reports on meetings between the Taliban representatives and U.S diplomats had been published a while ago while recently the United States appointed Zalmay Khalilzad as its special envoy to Afghanistan in order to lead the process of peace talks with the Taliban.

Zalmay is one of the key American politicians on Afghanistan and is expected to put an end to the Afghan war eventually. This expectation is rooted in the fact that as an American politician, he had a vital role in the establishment and strengthening of the new Afghan system after 2001 and had also carried out important US missions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The first part of the CSRS Weekly Analysis has discussed the new mission of Zalmay Khalilzad and the future of peace talks with the Taliban.

The second part of the analysis is allocated for examining the barriers facing the upcoming Parliamentary Elections. The process of the upcoming Parliamentary Elections has encountered numerous problems and challenges. Last month, the Afghan political parties boycotted the electoral process due to its mechanism and lack of the use of biometric system in the elections; however, as the demands of the political parties have now been accepted and the Elections Commission (IEC) will hold elections using the biometric system, there remains some skepticism regarding the quality and usage of the biometric devices. Meanwhile, a number of political parties accuse the IEC of not allowing them to monitor the elections.

Khalilzad's New Mission and Future of Afghan Peace Talks



Approximately one month ago, Zalmay Khalilzad was appointed as the US State Department Special Advisor on leading the peace talks between Afghan government and Taliban. Based on remarks from the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Zalmay Khalilzad will lead the Washington efforts on supporting the peace talks between the Afghan government and Taliban, paving the way for these talks as well as participating in them.

Last week, Zalmay Khalilzad initiated his new mission with a 10-day visit to Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar. Apparently, the purpose of these visits was to pave the way for face-to-face talks with Taliban and an effort towards putting an end to the ongoing war in Afghanistan.

Afghan-American Khalilzad has adequate experience in the Afghan-related issues. The mission of maintaining peace and putting an end to the Afghan war is given to him at a time when recent national and international-level efforts made in this regard were futile and conversely increased the severity of war in the country.

The new mission of Zalmay Khalilzad, the efforts on peace talks with Taliban considering the bloody battleground of Afghanistan, and the impact of Khalilzad's new mission on the Afghan issue are discussed here.

The New Mission of Zalmay Khalilzad

Since the last four decades, as an American, Zalmay Khalilzad has played a vital role in the Afghan-American ties as well as political games in Afghanistan. Following the U.S. attack on Afghanistan and collapse of the Afghan regime, Zalmay Khalilzad was the first U.S. special envoy to Afghanistan who had an important role in the Bonn Conference and establishment of the new political system in Afghanistan. From 2003-2005, he worked as the U.S. ambassador in Afghanistan and during this time, he had a key role in the compilation of a new Afghan Constitution.

Khalilzad is, once again, appointed as the U.S. special envoy to Afghanistan while the 17 year old U.S. war in Afghanistan faces a deadlock. Thus, the U.S. has given the Taliban a green light for ending the war through initiating direct talks.

The appointment of Zalmay Khalilzad as the U.S. special envoy to Afghanistan for leading the peace talks with Taliban and putting an end to the 17-year long U.S war in Afghanistan is, apparently, signifying that the U.S is fatigued by the war with Taliban and thus in pursuit of a solution for the Afghan issue through peace talks. However, considering the complex situation of Afghanistan (increase in aggressive attacks of Taliban, killings of civilians in air strikes of Afghan and foreign forces, and remarks of Scott Miller, general commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan regarding prolonging of the Afghan war and lack of withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan), it seems that finding a solution for putting an end to the Afghan crisis is not as simple as seems.

Peace Talks with Taliban

Efforts on initiating peace talks with Taliban have begun a decade ago by the Afghan government and international community after the war increased in severity and the Taliban activities were revived in different parts of Afghanistan. Although national, regional and international level efforts have been made in this regard, a tangible result is yet to be achieved.

In 2010, the Afghan government established the High Peace Council (HPC) for working towards achieving peace. Later several meetings were held in different regional countries in an effort towards initiating peace talks with the Taliban. After the National Unity Government (NUG) was formed, these efforts became more serious. In the last four years of NUG, the Urumqi meeting in China, the Murrie Meeting in Islamabad, quadrilateral meetings on peace, Kabul Process meetings and several meetings of religious scholars in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia are among the important efforts in this regard. However, the Afghan government is yet to bring the Taliban to the negotiation table. Apparently the Afghan government faces a deadlock in this regard.

On the other hand, the 17-year war of the U.S in Afghanistan is passing through its bloodiest period. A year after the U.S. announced its war strategy, Donald Trump, understating the situation, ordered unofficial direct talks with Taliban. The reports on meetings between a senior U.S diplomat and Taliban representatives in Qatar was also published. Following these efforts, the mission of Khalilzad can also be considered as another step in a series of such efforts.

Since every small step toward achieving peace and stability is seen with optimism, the latest decision by the U.S has also made a number of Afghans hopeful for maintenance of peace in the country, hoping the decision will facilitate better grounds for having the Afghan crisis solved.

Will Khalilzad succeed in his Mission?

Zalmay Khalilzad has begun working on the mission for the purpose of coordinating the peace talks from five important countries in the region and has visited Afghanistan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia till now.

In his visit to Afghanistan, he met Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, Chief Executive of Afghanistan, Dr. Abdullah and a number of officials, as well as political and Jihadi leaders. He discussed the Afghan situation and efforts for success of the peace process and security maintenance in the country. Following his Kabul visit, Khalilzad headed to Islamabad on Tuesday (October 8, 2018). He met Pakistani Foreign Minister, Mehmood Quraishi and a number of other Pakistani officials to discuss the solution to Afghan war and peace with them. The Pakistani officials, once again, promised that they would cooperate regarding peace in Afghanistan. He then travelled to Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia on October 9 and met the Saudi officials there to discuss the issue of maintaining peace and ending the war in Afghanistan with them.

Zalmay Khalilzad is expected to visit UAE and Qatar after Saudi Arabia. There are reports that he will meet Taliban representatives in Qatar as well. However, the 10-day visit by Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. consultation on peace in Afghanistan, and efforts on engaging Saudi Arabia in the Afghan peace issue is indicative of further and serious efforts for putting pressure on Taliban to sit at the table for peace talks. In the meantime, the arrival of Khalilzad to Kabul and holding of meetings with different political and Jihadi figures in the country also demonstrates an effort to facilitate the grounds for initiating of peace talks inside Afghanistan.

Khalilzad's mission and all latest U.S efforts for initiation of peace talks with the Taliban are reason for optimism. It can be said that Khalilzad's visit to Islamabad and his efforts to attain the cooperation of Pakistan in the Afghan peace process, as well as putting pressure on Pakistan to decrease its support of the armed opposition of the Afghan government shows that the U.S wants to manage the peace talks taking its interests into account, and compensating the 17 years of its failures.

In addition, Washington is currently in a different situation with regards to the Afghan issue, confronting a number of regional countries that are against the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. In this case, for the sake of peace talks with Taliban, the U.S needs to bring necessary changes in its strategy toward U.S. relations with these countries, and thus should try to achieve the trust of these countries in order to have honest cooperation from these countries.

Last but not least, if the Afghan government and international community neglect the discussion on the basic factors of the Afghan war as it did in the past, and only try to bring the Taliban to the negotiations table through political, military, and religious pressure, it is believed that these efforts, as in the past, will not yield any result. End

Barriers Facing the Upcoming Parliamentary Elections



The upcoming Parliamentary Elections that were supposed to be held almost three years ago are planned to be held next week on 20 October.

Although, a few days remain to the upcoming Parliamentary Elections, the overall atmosphere in Afghanistan is one of concern and skepticism, putting a shadow on the process of upcoming Parliamentary Elections. The concerns include the poor security situation, political disputes in the country, as well as the people and political parties' lack of trust in the elections due to accusations of corruption and fraud against the electoral process.

Recently, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of Hezbi Islami Party of Afghanistan said that the upcoming Parliamentary Elections have been engineered by the Afghan government and Elections Commission (IEC) in a way that parties are not allowed presence in it nor are they given the right to monitor the elections. On the other hand, the Afghan Independent Elections Commission (IEC) says that 12 out of 72 registered political parties have been granted certificates to monitor the electoral process; however, the Hekmatyar-led Hezbi Islami Party of Afghanistan has not received the right to monitor the elections as it is yet to be registered with the Afghan Ministry of Justice.

The following topics are discussed here: The mechanism of and barriers facing the upcoming Parliamentary Elections, disputes of political parties with IEC and credibility of the results for the political opposition of the Afghan government.

Electoral Mechanism

A few months ago, the voters' registration process started in the centers of the Afghan provinces. The National Identity Card was the only approved document accepted for eligible (18 years old and above) voters while registering themselves. Meanwhile, those who did not possess ID cards, were able to receive it from the Population Registration Department of the Afghan government.

The eligible voters were registered in accordance with the information enshrined in their Identity cards and the certificate of registration was then pasted at the back of the ID card. The certificate contained the registration number, electoral zone and the specialized code of the voting center. It should be mentioned that the person was only allowed to vote in the center where he/she had registered themselves in.

This mechanism had the following problems for participating in the elections:

First; the paper ID cards were the only verified document considered for voting which could easily allow for widespread fraud in voting. A number of candidates made thousands of fake paper ID cards the evidence of which were presented to the media by the joint coalition of political parties. In some cases, several fake ID cards were distributed having the information of a single person.

Secondly; the discreet attaining of authorization stickers' books from the IEC has been another big problem in the process. The CSRS has received information which shows some candidates have made hundreds of ID cards holding no photo's with the cooperation of the Population Registration Department (PRD). These ID cards have also been stamped with authorization stickers by the employees of the IEC. Currently as the process has turned to biometric system, the owners of these ID cards are looking for people in exchange for money, to have their photos put on these ID cards in order to use them for voting on Election Day.

Thirdly; recently the IEC has announced that it will hire five thousand persons in order to monitor the electoral process and gather the related complaints on Election Days. However, the main concern remains whether these temporary employees would be reliable for such a great responsibility and what the guarantee would be that these persons would not work in favor of a specific candidate.

Opposition of Political Parties

In democratic countries, civil societies and political parties monitor the elections in order to ensure transparency; however, the transparency and monitoring of the upcoming Parliamentary Elections is the greatest concern, and the main source of opposition of civil societies and political movements against the Afghan government.

A while ago, Afghan political parties boycotted the IEC for lack of comprehensive mechanisms and tools for holding elections. Change in the electoral system, the usage of the biometric system in elections, and comprehensive monitoring of elections were the conflict points that brought distance between the government and political parties.

Although, the government has accepted the demands of the political parties and accepted the employment of modern technology in elections, concerns on quality and transparency of biometric devices remains. On the other hand, the poor security situation in the country and repeated threats from the Taliban against elections are factors that challenge the upcoming elections.

Moreover, President Ghani, during the four year term of the National Unity Government (NUG), has tried to remove the small islands of powers in the country or at least weaken the head of them. Hence, President Ghani wants to weaken and get rid of leaders of political parties from the political scene. On the contrary, the political parties have always tried to put pressure on President Ghani and make him accept their demands. Furthermore, some analysis indicates that some political movements and parties intentionally make efforts to prevent the holding of Parliamentary Elections in order for the legitimacy of government to be brought under question, and for them to have the opportunity to raise their voice for formation of a temporary government.

Will Elections be held on Time?

Afghan government and IEC have always emphasized that the Parliamentary Elections will be held in all provinces of Afghanistan except for Ghazni. However, there are some reasons that have led to concerns over the holding of Parliamentary Elections on time. Among such concerns are the security situation in the country, the Taliban threats against the elections, the lack of trust of some political parties in transparency of the elections, the lack of arrival of biometric devices to the country, and the lack of awareness proper usage of these devices by people and IEC employees, especially in remote areas.

On the one hand, the Afghan government does not have control over the entire Afghan territory due to war and deteriorated security situation, and on the other hand the people skepticism due to corruption and fraud in the electoral process and their lack of trust in the process is on the peak. These are factors that have brought the legitimacy of Parliamentary Elections under question.

Despite all the problems mentioned before, if the Afghan government held elections in such circumstances, the elections would be limited to cities and the candidates that were announced victor would not be able to represent the entire Afghanistan. It goes without saying that holding general elections with the ongoing conditions in the country is a task impossible.

Additionally, there are possibilities that some provinces will be represented by candidates from a single ethnic group in the Parliament (like Ghazni in the previous elections). If this happens, the elections' results will not be accepted as general, and there will be disputes and confrontations in the country as there were regarding the 2014 Presidential Elections.

End

Contact Us:

Email: info@csrskabul.com - csrskabul@gmail.com

Website: www.csrskabul.com - www.csrskabul.net

Office: **(+93) 202564049 - (+93) 784089590**



Researcher and Editor of Weekly Analysis: **Zia-ul-Islam Shirani**

Researcher and Distributor of Weekly Analysis: **Ahmad Shah Rashed**

Translated into English by **Abdullah Jawed**

Edited by **Aisha Khatibi**