

The Afghan Elections and the Bonn Process: Assessing India's Options

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The thrice postponed Afghan parliamentary and provincial council elections are finally over. But, is the Bonn-mandated political process over? With the US intent on cutting down its troop levels in Afghanistan this year, is the 'war on terror' in Afghanistan also over? It is being said that the Bonn process has concluded with the September 18, 2005 elections. If so, then it is pertinent to examine the end-result of the four-year political process and the recently concluded elections. The three landmark events of the process—adoption of a new Constitution by the *Loya Jirga* in January 2004, the presidential election in October 2004 and the recently concluded September 18 parliamentary elections—pale into insignificance when compared with the conditions prevailing in Afghanistan. The elections have neatly brought out, and to an extent brought back, a complex mix of actors and forces that have defined the socio-political character of Afghan war for over a quarter of a century. The very fact that 2004-05 has been the worst for Afghanistan in terms of levels of violence, drug production and the Taliban onslaught, makes the whole political process and the 'war on terror' questionable. It is in the context of the enormous challenges that lie ahead in post-election Afghanistan that India needs to assess its options.

The 159 Million Dollar Elections

Is post-election Afghanistan any different from the pre-election one? It was a foregone conclusion that the new Afghan Parliament would be a motley mix of Islamists, former mujahideen¹, drug barons, former communists², technocrats, academics, independents, women and the Taliban. The strange mix of candidates that have sprung up from the elections reflects the diversity of stakeholders in the Afghan polity. The victory of some Taliban candidates and their appointment in the *Meshrano*

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Jirga (the 102-member upper house) by President Karzai is a notable development.³

The biggest challenge before President Karzai and his backers is to secure parliamentary approval for his ministerial appointments. President Karzai's position in the domestic political calculus remains as precarious as ever. His government will, in all probability, remain dependent on his relationship with the diverse mujahideen factions that have come to dominate the new Afghan Parliament.⁴ The possibility of power realignments among the different factions to outmanoeuvre one another will continue to be the defining feature of post-election Afghan politics. The 12-party coalition or the National Understanding Front (the *Jabha-ye Tafahom-e Melli*) formerly led by the Tajik leader Muhammad Yunus Qanuni can become a political force for President Karzai to reckon with.⁵

The results of the elections⁶ make it amply clear that President Karzai may have to reshuffle his cabinet to accommodate some more mujahideen or factional commanders, or their proxy candidates, particularly from among the former Northern Alliance (NA). In effect, the technocrats and the independents in the current cabinet may be increasingly replaced by candidates representing the competing interests of various mujahideen factions. President Karzai's inability to appoint a new interior minister since Ahmed Ali Jalali resigned on September 27, 2005 underlines his difficulties. He is all too aware of the fact that without cutting deals with the various Afghan factions, it would not be possible for Kabul to have even a minimal presence in the provinces. It is difficult to say to what extent Karzai's attempt to drive divisions in the loosely knit NA, and to turn their inter-factional and intra-faction divides to his advantage in the run-up to the presidential election, has met with success.

However, President Karzai has definitely emerged as a rallying figure in the US and the UN-backed political structure in Kabul, both for the international community and the mujahideen leaders and commanders. It appears that President Karzai and the mujahideen will continue to remain in an inter-dependence mode for times to come. President Karzai will have to continue with his balancing act between the aspirations of the mujahideen and the Islamists on the one hand, and the urgent need to carry out the reforms process on the other.⁷ But do the Afghan people have the patience for it keeping in view the high level of corruption among the government officials and the slow pace of reconstruction and

rehabilitation efforts? The overall electoral process has undoubtedly thrown up new actors in the political set-up in Kabul, who are highly qualified West-oriented professionals and technocrats with no militia behind them. The constant friction between the conservative older mujahideen leadership and the reform-minded pro-West members in the government will continue to test President Karzai's leadership as before. Therefore, the challenges ahead for Hamid Karzai, whose leadership itself is unique and unconventional in the Afghan context, will not be any different in post-election Afghanistan.

Bonn Process: Concluded or Failed?

The international focus on Afghanistan receded as the Iraq War unfolded. The basic objective of institution-building tapered off as the Bonn process itself failed to institutionalise. The fundamental spirit of the Bonn process was lost as all efforts were diverted towards securing Hamid Karzai's position in Afghan politics prior to the US presidential elections, and in holding together diverse constituents of the provisional government led by him. As a result, Karzai did emerge as a central figure in the internationally-backed Bonn process, but it also led to the reestablishment and reemergence of the mujahideen leadership who have since been a hindrance to the process of reforms and institution-building.

The US failed to reconcile its interests in Afghanistan and the region with the objectives of the Bonn Agreement.⁸ Its continued dependence on the militia provided by various mujahideen factions, since the beginning of the Operation Enduring Freedom in October 2001, was bound to legitimise an overarching role for the mujahideen leadership in the Bonn process. The reworking of the US-mujahideen nexus to oust their common foe, the Taliban, made the Bonn process more of a US agenda than an Afghan one. All through the four years, mujahideen leaders and commanders have been resisting the idea of disarmament and demobilisation of their private armies. They have also been resisting the idea of anti-narcotics operations as they finance their militias through drug money. Simply put, they are against any idea which would lead to the dilution of their power. With the Afghan national army and police beset with many problems, President Karzai's authority remains limited and dependent on foreign troops and the cooperation of the mujahideen factions.

The policy objective of the US on counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics and political stability in Afghanistan has been an apparent failure. The fact that the Taliban and its allies are far from decimation; that much of the country is still controlled by extra-constitutional authorities; that the levels of violence and casualty have been the highest this year; and that Afghanistan remains the world's largest illicit opium-poppy producer⁹ bear testimony to the failure of the 'war on terror' in Afghanistan. Ironically, despite all the dismal facts and statistics, the US role remains indispensable. The US policy towards the Taliban, which has been a mix of outright military action and reconciliation, has a strong bearing on the future of Afghanistan.

The Bonn process may have thus far failed in terms of institution-building and reforms, but the significant role it played in providing a certain framework to the post-9/11 political process in Afghanistan cannot be missed. Compared to previous agreements and accords, the Bonn Agreement was able to ensure the involvement of the UN and the international community in re-building Afghanistan. But the key question, however, remains. What after the elections? What after the Bonn process? With no qualitative change in the situation in the last four years, and with US intent on lowering its presence in Afghanistan, there is a growing skepticism about the future of Afghanistan.

Keeping in view the necessity to build institutions of governance and to carry out reforms, it is imperative to devise a long-term plan under the aegis of the UN for the post-election Afghanistan. The peace and reconstruction process in Afghanistan needs continuity otherwise whatever little has been achieved in the last four years will be conclusively undone. It will be prudent for the international community and the US to realise the folly of re-abandoning Afghanistan.

Assessing India's Constraints and Options

The challenges and constraints to India's Afghan policy are immense. The strong element of unpredictability and uncertainty in Afghan politics calls for constant evaluation of India's options in Afghanistan. The growing Indo-Afghan ties are commensurate with India's geoeconomic interests both within and beyond the Indian Subcontinent. The perfectly timed visit of the Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh to Kabul on August 28-29, 2005, just three weeks before the crucial September 18 elections,

and the areas of cooperation identified between the two countries, makes it amply clear that India is looking for a tangible and a long-term engagement in Afghanistan.

In fact, India's engagement in Afghanistan has come a long way since the closure of its embassy in Kabul in September 1996 to the August 2005 visit of the Indian Prime Minister, the first in 29 years. Since the January 2002 Tokyo Conference for the reconstruction of Afghanistan, India has committed an assistance of \$550 million. India has been involved in training programmes and in humanitarian and infrastructure development projects in Afghanistan. India's contribution in the training of Afghan diplomats, judges, police officers, doctors; developing Afghanistan's civil aviation and transport sectors; construction of roads, dams, hospitals, educational institutions; and in establishing telecom and power transmission lines is a widely acclaimed fact.

Apart from the political uncertainty in Afghanistan and India's own resource-limitations, the Indo-Afghan relationship is constrained by its geography and the Pakistan factor. Though India is among the leading donors to Afghanistan, clearly the largest in the region, the Indo-Afghan relationship is yet to realise its full potential. The fact that India does not have borders contiguous with Afghanistan puts India into a dependency mode. Pakistan's refusal to provide overland transit facilities for Indian goods bound for Afghanistan and further to Iran and the Central Asian markets has led to India taking a longer and a circuitous sea route via Iran. Ironically, Pakistan allows Afghanistan to transport its goods bound for India. The delicate nature of the ongoing political process in Afghanistan and the fractious nature of Afghan polity, coupled with Pakistan's intransigence in facilitating Indo-Afghan trade, are likely to test the resilience of Indo-Afghan ties.

The current challenge before India, given the above constraints, is how to sustain the growing momentum of its relationship with Afghanistan. Some of the viable options before India are:

- India needs to consolidate and build up on its four years of achievements in Afghanistan by not letting Manmohan Singh's recent visit become a touch-and-go affair. If India is to reach out to Central Asia and the Gulf region, Indo-Afghan ties have to be high in the order of priority. India should not lose sight of the

geostrategic significance of Afghanistan as its growing political and economic interests lie both within the subcontinent and the regions beyond.

- India should further broad-base its engagement in Afghanistan by promoting greater institutional cooperation between the two countries. Identifying new areas of cooperation and opening new vistas of joint ventures will have to be a continuing process. India needs to engage diverse groups within the civil society in Afghanistan, such as, political parties, intellectuals, NGOs, educational and research institutions, media groups, cultural organisations, businessmen and so on. Given the shared past and civilizational ties between the two countries, the idea of establishing an Indian Cultural Centre in Afghanistan and vice-versa can go a long way in reinvigorating the two countries' relationship.
- With Afghanistan now having a newly elected parliament, regular interaction between the parliamentarians can go a long way strengthening the relations between the two governments. India can take the initiative by sending a parliamentary delegation to Kabul to interact with the newly elected Afghan parliamentarians and to subsequently invite them to India.
- Both bilateral and multilateral approaches are important in India's contribution to the reconstruction of Afghanistan.
- Given the uncertainties of Indo-Pak ties, India needs to strengthen the infrastructure which facilitates its trade with Afghanistan via Iran. The construction of Zaranj-Delaram road is a crucial step in the same direction. It will be prudent if alternate routes to Afghanistan and Central Asia, particularly via Iran, are developed and strengthened. Indo-Iranian ties are vital to facilitating trade not only with Afghanistan but also with the Gulf region and Central Asia. India should continue to explore ways of overcoming its geographical limitations by circumventing Pakistan.
- India needs to build bridges with all the major ethnic groups in Afghanistan. India should balance its relationship with both the Pashtuns and the minority ethnic groups. The idea of engaging anti-India politico-military formations in Afghanistan should not be considered as untenable in the changed and changing scenario in Afghanistan.

- As Indo-Pak relationship impinges on the relations and the interests of all the three countries—India, Pakistan and Afghanistan—and the regions beyond, viable scope for cooperation between the three countries may be explored. To promote a strong sense of economic cooperation in the region, the political and economic interests of the respective countries will have to be accommodated.

President Karzai had categorically stated during Manmohan Singh's visit that peace between India and Pakistan is vital for regional security and economic cooperation. During the joint news conference, President Karzai had emphasised, "Afghanistan is very happy to see a dialogue for better relations between India and Pakistan. Afghanistan is directly affected by friendship between the two countries. The improvement of relations between India and Pakistan are such a necessity for the people of this whole region that overtakes every other consideration".¹⁰ Aware of the fact that Pakistan's cooperation is imperative for any regional effort to root out terrorism, Karzai further remarked that, "India, Pakistan and Afghanistan need to join hands to fight this global menace".¹¹

However, given Pakistan's internal political dynamics, it is unlikely that it will or will be able to completely renounce its support for the Taliban and other extremist forces in Afghanistan. Despite the US pressure, Pakistan has not yet given up its policy of exporting, promoting and supporting terrorism in order to further its political agenda against both its eastern and western neighbours. The Taliban rule and events of 9/11 have made it clear that a stable, democratic and prosperous Afghanistan is not only in the interest of India, but also crucial for regional and international security.

India as the world's largest democracy is playing an important role in supporting democracy, institution-building and in consolidating the achievements of the four-year Bonn process in Afghanistan. In South Asia, India is the only credible country which is in a position to rollback terrorism and religious extremism epitomised by the Taliban movement, in cooperation with the international community. In fact, India's role in the economic revival of Afghanistan and in promoting regional economic cooperation is an essential prerequisite.

However, much also depends on the US' future policy in Afghanistan. The inability of the US to address the paradoxes of its 'war on terror' has thus far left the political climate in Afghanistan more uncertain and fluid.

The persistent divide between the US' regional agenda and the interest of Afghanistan does not bode well for the latter. US withdrawal from Afghanistan would inevitably lead to a full comeback of those very forces against whom it had resolved to wage war after 9/11. In that sense, the consequences of re-abandoning Afghanistan at this critical juncture will be disastrous. As for India, it will have to wade through the complex maze of Afghan and subcontinental politics, enmeshed with the interests of extra-regional powers and actors, to pursue its expanding economic and political interests. For now, growing Indo-Afghan relationship is a reality.

References/End Notes

- ¹ Often referred to as 'warlords' or 'regional strongmen'.
- ² Former communist General Noor-ul-haq Alomi from Kandahar; former interior minister in the Soviet -backed communist government in the 1980s, Syed Muhammad Gulabzoi from Khost; former deputy minister, Babrak Shinwari from Nangarhar; former advisor to President Najibullah, Kabir Ranjbar from Kabul are among the important former communists who won the elections.
- ³ The notable among the former members of the Taliban who won seats in the *Wolesi Jirga* (the lower house) are ex-commander Haji Mullah Abdul Salaam Rocketi from Zabul, ex-provincial governor Mawlavi Mohammad Islam Mohammadi from Samangan and a senior former security official Hanif Shah Al-Hussein from Khost. As for the *Meshrano Jirga* (the upper house), Arsala Rahmani, the deputy minister for religious affairs in the former Taliban Government from Paktiya Province, is among the 34 members recently appointed by President Karzai. Other important appointees to the *Meshrano Jirga* are the former defence minister and leader of the Tajik militia, Marshal Muhammad Qasim Fahim from Panjshir; Sebghatullah Mojadeddi from Kabul; and Sher Muhammad Akhund, the governor of Helmand Province.
- ⁴ The notable among the former *mujahideen* leaders and commanders elected to the *Wolesi Jirga* are Abdurrah Rasul Sayyaf of *Ittehad-e-Islami* (renamed as *Tanzim-e Dawat-e Islami-ye Afghanistan*), Haji Mohammad Mohaqqiq and Mohammad Yonus Qanuni from Kabul; Padshah Khan Zadran from Paktiya; Haji Hazarat Ali from Nangarhar; Pir Sayed Ishaq Gailani of *Nahzat-e Hambastagi-ye Melli-ye Afghanistan* from Paktika; and Burhan-ud Din Rabbani of *Jamiat-e-Islami* from Badakhshan.
- ⁵ Muhammad Yunus Qanuni has stepped down as the leader of the National Understanding Front or *Jabha-ye Tafahom-e Melli* after being elected as the Chairman of the *Wolesi Jirga* or the lower house of the Afghan national assembly on December 21, 2005. Former Afghan president and *Jamiat-e-Islami* leader Burhan-ud Din Rabbani, who withdrew his candidacy for the chairmanship of the *Wolesi Jirga* in favour of Qanuni, is likely to be the new opposition leader. See

“Qanuni Steps Down From Opposition Leadship” at <http://www.azadiradio.org/en/news/2005/12/13385C33-584A-4E7F-93B7-2DE69EB99647.ASP>

- ⁶ The complete details of the election process and the final certified results of the elections to the *Wolesi Jirga* (the Lower House), the Provisional Councils and the *Meshrano Jirga* (the Upper House) are available at <http://www.jemb.org/>
- ⁷ Also see Vishal Chandra, “Warlords and Karzai’s Balancing Act”, *Strategic Analysis*, 29(1), January-March 2005. pp. 155-161.
- ⁸ The Bonn Agreement, formally known as *Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-establishment of Permanent Government Institutions*, was signed on December 5, 2001. The four Afghan groups invited to the Bonn Conference (Nov 27-Dec 05, 2001) were – Peshawar Group, the Northern Alliance, Rome Group and the Cyprus Group, each representing varying background and political interests. The text of the Agreement is available at http://www.unama-afg.org/docs/_nonUN%20Docs/_International-Conferences&Forums/Bonn-Talks/bonn.htm. Also at <http://www.uno.de/frieden/afghanistan/talks/agreement.htm>
- ⁹ For further details see Afghanistan Opium Survey 2004 released by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes and the Counter Narcotics Directorate of the Government of Afghanistan in November 2004, at http://www.unodc.org/pdf/afg/afghanistan_opium_survey_2004.pdf
- ¹⁰ Yousuf Azimy, “Karzai Says Better India-Pakistani Ties Vital”, at <http://www.swissinfo.org/sen/swissinfo.html?siteSect=143&sid=6042952&cKey=1125227124000>.
- ¹¹ Makia Monir and Zubair Babakarkhail, “New Delhi Assures Kabul of All-Out Support Against Terrorism”, at <http://www.pajhwok.com/en/news/viewStory.asp?lng=eng&id=6553>

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