



## Afghans Find Their Way

By Caroline Wadhams    March 10, 2014

Afghans will soon decide new leadership for their country in presidential and provincial council elections scheduled for April 5, 2014. The Afghan constitution requires President Hamid Karzai, who has served as president since 2001, to step down and transfer power to an elected successor.<sup>1</sup>

This political transition accompanies the ongoing withdrawal of U.S. military forces and NATO's International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF, from Afghanistan, whose combat mission ends on December 31, 2014. Given the current Afghan system's dependence on international military forces and funding, how Afghanistan adapts to reduced international involvement and new Afghan leadership remains unknown.<sup>2</sup>

Afghanistan's future stability will depend primarily on Afghans coming to agreements over who leads the country, how Afghanistan is governed and secured, who benefits from the political system, and how Afghan leaders approach the insurgency and regional players. Based on Afghan performance, the international community should aim to play an important—but secondary—role: filling in the significant financial gaps, providing training and technical assistance in a variety of security and governmental sectors, and deterring spoiler behavior from groups within Afghanistan and actors in the region.<sup>3</sup>

Both unifying and centrifugal forces exist simultaneously in Afghanistan, and which forces will prove stronger as international troops draw down remains unknown. Based on consultations with Afghan civil society members; Afghan and international governmental officials; members of the Afghan National Security Forces, or ANSF; and NATO-ISAF officials in Afghanistan and the United States, it is clear that unifying forces in Afghanistan have strengthened since 2001 and may be able to prevent a return to an expanded civil war. These unifying forces are Afghans who have become stakeholders in the current political system. They include young people, the media, many Afghan women and representatives of organized Afghan women's groups, traditional leaders and new civil society groups, Afghan government officials, and members of the Afghan National Security Forces. They wish to build upon and improve the current system, rather than overthrow it and begin anew.

Afghanistan's stability remains in the national security interest of the United States. Expanded conflict in Afghanistan has the potential to not only reverse numerous developmental gains for Afghans but also to spill over into nuclear-armed Pakistan and throughout the region. Insecurity in Afghanistan could drive refugees across Afghanistan's borders and enable violent militant groups to flourish, including Al Qaeda-affiliated groups, placing strains on Afghanistan's neighbors. As in the past, regional countries—including India, Pakistan, Russia, and Iran—may decide to back their respective proxies, thereby leading to Afghanistan's further fragmentation and tensions among countries.

Between now and the presidential and provincial council elections in April and beyond, the role for the United States and the international community will be to support those Afghan actors who are stakeholders in the current political system, both inside and outside the government, as they embark on their own political, security, and economic transitions away from deep dependency on the international community. While reducing their military presence and funding over time, the United States and its partners will still need to provide training, advice, and financial support tied to performance and transparency for years to come.<sup>4</sup>

The analysis below describes the three transitions underway in Afghanistan, much of it informed by a Center for American Progress research trip with John Podesta and Tom Perriello, former Chair and Counselor to the Center respectively, in November 2013, in cooperation with Heinrich Böll Stiftung, a German nonprofit organization with offices around the world, including in Afghanistan. Our trip focused on meetings with traditional and nontraditional civil society groups in Kabul. This paper also provides a set of recommendations for how U.S. policymakers and the international community in general can support these transitions, with the understanding that Afghan actors themselves will play the most prominent role.

Afghanistan's challenges will revolve around three crucial areas: politics, security, and the economy. Politically, while the presidential elections appear to be on track, Afghans will need to create a stronger political consensus that the elections will only partially advance. This will most likely require a larger peace process that includes elements of the insurgency and discussions among candidates so that the presidential victor does not create a zero-sum political environment—areas where the international community can serve a facilitating role. Afghanistan's weak economy remains heavily reliant on external funding, leaving Afghanistan extremely vulnerable and dependent on the U.S. Congress and parliaments around the world for the survival of their government and the sustainability of their security forces. Finally, while the Afghan National Security Forces have strengthened, violence during and after the election and tensions with neighboring countries will test Afghanistan's military and security progress.

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## Political transition

### Elections

The biggest determinant of Afghanistan's stability, at least in the short term, will be the success of the political transition process and whether it ushers in a more legitimate Afghan government or creates further fragmentation among Afghan leaders and ethnic groups. The current political consensus among Afghans, established at the Bonn Conference in Germany, in 2001, is in disarray after years of poor and predatory governance and perceptions of marginalization.

Unlike one year ago, when many in Afghanistan and abroad questioned whether the presidential elections would happen at all due to fears that President Karzai would prevent their realization, the elections in April now appear to be inevitable. The passage of the election laws, the establishment of the Independent Electoral Commission and the Electoral Complaints Commission, the nomination of the presidential candidates, and the official start of campaigning on February 3 have all created significant momentum.<sup>5</sup> Unlike previous elections, Afghans are leading the planning of the electoral process and the security around the elections, with international actors in supporting roles.

Afghans, both in polling and in our meetings, have expressed enthusiasm for the elections. A December 2013 poll by Glevum Associates found that 86 percent of the respondents believed that holding elections was an Islamic act, while 96 percent considered the selection of the future leader to be important.<sup>6</sup> A September 2013 pre-election survey conducted by Assess, Transform, Reach, or ATR, Consulting found that 79 percent of respondents intended to vote in the 2014 presidential elections, stating that a risky security situation would be the only deterrent from voting.<sup>7</sup> Our discussions with Afghans echoed these findings, as the elections were characterized as the top priority. While concerns existed over potential fraud and quality of the candidates, Afghan interlocutors argued the elections were essential for Afghanistan's stability and state building process.

Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, Abdullah Abdullah, and Zalmay Rassoul are seen as the leading presidential candidates out of the 11 total who are now in the running. Just one month before the election, Qayum Karzai—President Karzai's brother and 1 of the 11 candidates—dropped out of the race. More than 2,700 candidates are competing for the provincial councils.<sup>8</sup> A joint December 2013 poll conducted by ATR Consulting and TOLONews showed Abdullah leading, with 27 percent of the respondents identifying him as the preferred candidate, followed by Ghani.<sup>9</sup> If the tickets—with slots for one president and two vice-presidents—remain the same, it is unlikely any candidate will receive more than 50 percent of the vote, which will lead to a second round.

Many predict that Abdullah Abdullah may face off against a Pashtun-led ticket, a possibly dangerous situation with the potential to exacerbate the fault lines of Afghanistan's civil war. Many of the candidates are running on platforms that emphasize paradoxically both continuity and change: sustaining the system while recognizing the need for reform, particularly to improve governance. Leading candidates, such as Abdullah and Ghani, have stated that fighting corruption and establishing strong rule of law are essential to bridge the gap between the Afghan people and the government.<sup>10</sup>

While many Afghans voice that the election will not fundamentally alter the nature of the conflict or address the structural flaws in the government, including overcentralization of power in the presidency and high levels of corruption, they believe it has the potential to provide the current political system with some breathing space and to strengthen and expand the frayed political consensus established in the 2001 Bonn Conference. The entrance of new Afghan leadership with the political will to tackle Afghanistan's challenges could strengthen the legitimacy of the Afghan government both in the eyes of Afghans, in the region, and for international donors. Of course, this will depend on an electoral outcome that is generally perceived by Afghans and the international community as the result of a fair and legitimate process. The new government will then have to use this space to conduct the hard work of improving accountability, addressing the structural weaknesses of the government—its overcentralization and lack of checks and balances—growing the economy, and pursuing a peace process.

Many Afghans also argue that a technically sound process, while essential, will be insufficient in creating a legitimate outcome because a technically sound process can still result in effective Pashtun disenfranchisement, especially in the south and east of Afghanistan, where the insurgency is strongest. Political negotiations among candidates to avoid a winner-take-all outcome may be necessary, but this is not a place where U.S. or foreign policymakers can engage easily without being subjected to damaging accusations of interference.

The importance of this political transition cannot be overstated. A failed electoral process, in which the outcome is seriously disputed, has the potential to trigger violence and to undermine the cohesion of Afghan security forces.

## Peace process

Most Afghans in our conversations argued that an inclusive peace process that includes outreach to Afghanistan's diverse groups and insurgent elements will remain essential for long-term stability in Afghanistan and the region postelections, given the insurgency's resilience, Pakistan's ongoing support for the insurgency, and the potential fickleness of international donors. This peace process can contribute, like the election process, to building a stronger and more inclusive political consensus among Afghans.

Reconciliation efforts between the Afghan government and the Taliban leadership are currently stalled despite the Afghan government's alleged efforts to reach out to insurgents.<sup>11</sup> It is unlikely that a larger agreement with the insurgency and nonviolent Afghan groups will result until after the elections and the continuing drawdown of international forces, when different parties and regional actors can reassess their leverage in negotiations both politically and on the battlefield. Some Afghans argue that a successful election process, alongside the drawdown of international troops, may assist the peace process by increasing confidence in state durability and undermining the insurgents' narrative of imminent state collapse and the Afghan government being a puppet regime of the West. However, a failed electoral process would weaken the negotiating position of the Afghan government and potentially hurt the coherence—and therefore the effectiveness—of the ANSF.

The current mechanisms for a peace process, however, are perceived as largely illegitimate, according to our Afghan interlocutors, who include members of civil society and tribal leaders who have been involved in Afghanistan's Peace and Reintegration Program, or APRP, a government program intended to reintegrate insurgents.<sup>12</sup> According to many Afghans, APRP is ineffective, insufficiently focused on grievance resolution, and lacks the capacity to provide protection for those who want to leave the insurgency. The Afghan High Peace Council, or HPC, is the leading body of the APRP in charge of reconciliation and reintegration and is also criticized for its lack of transparency and inadequate consultation with local leaders, women, and civil society groups.

Many also argue that a neutral, outside mediator remains necessary, as the United States and the Afghan government remain central parties to the conflict and therefore cannot effectively lead in the pursuit of a peace agreement. This mediator would facilitate an internal Afghan peace process, which is also nested in larger regional discussions to address country-specific concerns. A number of U.S. and NATO-ISAF military officials also argued that military tactics needed to be better synchronized with a reconciliation strategy.

## Economic transition

Afghanistan's economy is almost entirely reliant on foreign assistance, which constitutes approximately 97 percent of Afghanistan's gross domestic product, or GDP.<sup>13</sup> Widespread corruption, weak rule of law, and ongoing insecurity continues to hinder private-sector growth and investment. Apart from opium production, which reached record highs in 2013, Afghanistan has few industries that generate jobs or revenues.<sup>14</sup> The mining sector is perceived as a potential driver of Afghanistan's economy over the long term, but it is years away from being profitable through revenue flows. A weak legal framework surrounding the mineral sector also has the potential to lead to increased conflict and corruption instead of wider benefits for the Afghan population.

As contracting money, jobs, and associated development and security assistance draw down along with U.S. and NATO-ISAF troops, Afghanistan faces a dangerous economic reality. Not only will Afghans have few economic opportunities, but the Afghan government, with annual revenues amounting to approximately \$1.7 billion, will also not be able to support itself on its own.<sup>15</sup> The total budget for the Afghan government, including the development budget and recurrent costs that account for salaries and other expenses, is \$7.3 billion; this does not include security forces that cost approximately \$6 billion more at their current size, creating a dangerous fiscal gap. Revenues are already beginning to decline as a result of the international community's drawdown and are expected to decrease even more as reductions in imports and cross-border trade take effect.<sup>16</sup>

As a result of this gap, the Afghan government will have to rely on foreign donors such as the United States and Europe for the majority of its funding for the foreseeable future. The international community has made a number of financial commitments over the past several years for both development priorities and the security forces. But maintaining billions of foreign dollars over a decade or longer is risky, given global financial woes and disillusionment with the Afghan conflict by populations in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere. The delay of the signing of the Bilateral Security Agreement, or BSA, and the Status of Forces Agreement between Afghanistan and NATO-ISAF may make sustaining outside funding even more difficult. U.S. officials have acknowledged that without a signed BSA, they may be forced to consider a total withdrawal of troops, leaving Afghan forces to fight the Taliban insurgency on their own.<sup>17</sup> An absence of U.S. and NATO troops will likely put the international community's financial commitments at risk.

The biggest line item for the international community is the ANSF. In May 2012, at the Chicago Summit, ISAF and the Afghan government made a commitment to decrease the size of the force from 352,000 troops to 228,500 troops in order to make it more affordable. At this smaller size, it is still expected to cost approximately \$4.1 billion, of which approximately \$2.3 billion will come from the United States and around \$1.4 billion will come from allies. After 2015, the Afghan government has agreed to contribute \$500 million annually and then gradually increase its cost burden over time.<sup>18</sup>

In Tokyo in July 2012, the international community committed to providing \$16 billion through 2015 to the Afghan government and to maintain support through 2017 at levels at or near those of the past decade.<sup>19</sup> The Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework establishes a set of mutual accountabilities between the Afghan government and its donor sponsors. The international community agreed to allocate more funding through the Afghan government budget and align assistance with Afghanistan's national priority programs. In return, the Afghan government must meet certain benchmarks related to good governance and accountability, such as conducting credible, inclusive, and transparent presidential and parliamentary elections and improving the integrity of financial disbursements by enforcing asset recovery and accountability after the Kabul Bank crisis, a 2010 political and economic scandal that threatened the Afghan economy.<sup>20</sup>

Afghanistan's weak economy and fiscal gap create enormous vulnerabilities for the Afghan state and overall Afghan stability. Afghans will remain heavily dependent on the international community for at least the next decade. If the international community, or individual parliaments and the U.S. Congress, decide to suspend funding due to frustration over corruption and waste, disagreement with Afghan priorities, and/or their own fiscal demands at home, Afghans may find themselves unable to maintain their state. In fact, the U.S. Congress has already begun decreasing spending on Afghanistan. In a January 2014 massive spending bill signed by President Barack Obama, U.S. lawmakers agreed to provide \$1.12 billion to Afghanistan for overall civilian assistance for fiscal year 2014—a 50 percent reduction from the previous fiscal year.<sup>21</sup>

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## Security transition

### Security within Afghanistan

Fighting between the insurgency and the Afghan-led coalition has remained constant through the winter, when fighting normally subsides. Insurgents will continue their attempts to increase violence during the electoral process to discredit the election and to undermine confidence in the Afghan government.<sup>22</sup> Security officials are rightly concerned about assassinations of candidates and other electoral officials in the lead-up to the election. Two campaign officials were already assassinated in February 2014, and the Taliban has targeted candidate Abdullah Abdullah's electoral team.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the Afghan constitutional provision that the death of a candidate requires a new election creates even greater perverse incentives and disruption.

On December 31, 2014, NATO-ISAF will terminate its current combat mission after more than 13 years. ISAF has envisioned contributing to a Resolute Support Mission after December 31, 2014, in order to continue supporting the ANSF as it faces a resilient insurgency, but this future mission now remains uncertain. As of March, the BSA between the United States and Afghanistan, the agreement outlining the parameters of a post-2014 U.S. presence in Afghanistan, remains unsigned. It is unclear how many U.S. forces, if any, will remain post-2014, and what NATO-ISAF will provide, given their dependence on U.S. decisions to determine their own troop levels and financial commitments. The U.S. military has reportedly decided to determine troop numbers following the Afghan presidential elections.<sup>24</sup> Without the BSA, NATO-ISAF officials argue that they cannot sign a Status of Forces Agreement with the Afghan government.<sup>25</sup>

ISAF's posture has fundamentally shifted in the past year from leading combat operations in 2012 to providing support to the Afghan National Security Forces as they lead operations against the insurgency. On June 18, 2013, the ANSF officially assumed security lead over the entire country. Afghan forces now lead the vast majority of all conventional and special operations, and ISAF's only unilateral operations are "for coalition security, route clearance to maintain freedom of movement, and redeployment."<sup>26</sup>

ISAF has already reduced its presence to 57,004 forces, including U.S. troops. Currently, 38,000 U.S. troops—both inside and outside the NATO-ISAF force—remain, a significant reduction from the peak troop levels in 2011 of 140,000 total NATO troops.<sup>27</sup> ISAF has also closed down or transferred the majority of its military bases and outposts and transferred at least 11 of its 28 provincial reconstruction teams—military-civilian units that support reconstruction efforts—to Afghan government authority.<sup>28</sup> As a result, Afghan forces are taking the vast majority of the casualties: According to the Pentagon's October 2013 report, Afghan casualties increased by 79 percent compared to the previous year, while ISAF casualties dropped by 59 percent.<sup>29</sup>

ISAF is now focused on supporting and strengthening the ANSF so that it can provide enhanced security across the country by 2014. As of August 2013, an Afghan security force of nearly 344,602 Afghans has already been established—including approximately 185,239 Army troops and 152,336 police personnel; ISAF is attempting to fill in gaps related to air support and logistics as well as strengthen Afghan institutions and system structures that allow for the proper management and maintenance of a professional security force.<sup>30</sup> Working closely with the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of the Interior, ISAF has assisted in developing military planning, programming, budget, and acquisition systems.

ISAF officials claim that the ANSF is exceeding their expectations on the battlefield, leading complicated operations against insurgents and consolidating control over urban areas.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, ISAF officials acknowledge that the force will not be sustainable for some time without continued ISAF support. The Afghan government cannot afford the current \$6 billion annual cost of the ANSF, and ongoing gaps also exist related to airlift and airpower, leadership, logistics capacity, and medical evacuation. Moreover, a stalemate with the insurgency remains; the insurgency has been able to maintain the same operational tempo over the past four years and make some territorial gains in rural areas.<sup>32</sup> Affiliated terrorist groups such as the Haqqani Network and small numbers of Al Qaeda, along with criminal networks associated with the drug trade, continue to threaten Afghan stability.

## Security in the region

Regional players may also attempt to increase their influence in Afghanistan to advance their own interests as the international community draws down its presence, especially if insecurity worsens. While countries in the region seemingly have a stake and shared interest in a stable Afghanistan, they have often defined a desirable end state in Afghanistan differently. For example, Iran has firmly opposed, at least publicly, the BSA between Afghanistan and the United States and worries about the United States remaining in their backyard.<sup>33</sup> Pakistan too has objected to a long-term U.S. security presence,

while India supports a close U.S.-Afghanistan partnership. If security begins to deteriorate and/or the political transition fails to produce a legitimate successor to President Karzai, countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, China, and Russia may choose different proxies to back, as occurred in the Afghan civil war in the early 1990s.<sup>34</sup>

More than any other regional player, Pakistan has the ability to affect Afghanistan's stability. Pakistan's civilian and military leadership have expressed support for a stable Afghanistan and voiced concerns that greater instability in Afghanistan will threaten Pakistani security by providing a safe haven for insurgent groups such as the Tehrik-e-Taliban.<sup>35</sup> However, Pakistan has consistently undermined the prospects for Afghanistan's long-term peace by providing sanctuary, training, and financial support to the insurgency, in part to counter what it fears will be undue Indian influence in the country.<sup>36</sup> Due to the fact that Pakistan is under siege by Pakistani militant groups, it is unlikely to increase pressure on the Afghan Taliban, which would only increase its enemies.

It is difficult to predict how Afghanistan's neighbors will act over the next few years given the uncertainty of Afghanistan's future. But given longstanding regional interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs, the possibility of continued outside meddling in Afghan affairs is real. The withdrawal of the United States and NATO-ISAF countries may cause regional countries to rush in to advance their respective agendas, as occurred in the past. If the Afghan state, however, is perceived as the most powerful player in the conflict, there may be less incentive for regional actors to support destabilizing alternatives.

At this point, Afghanistan's stability will depend on a number of factors, many of which lay outside the military battlefield, including the political transition, international funding, and regional influences. As the Pentagon stated in a recent assessment report to the U.S. Congress, "... the biggest uncertainties facing Afghanistan are no longer primarily military."<sup>37</sup>

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## Next steps

Afghans will be the primary actors in determining their own future. The international community should only aim to support Afghans as they move through these tenuous transitions to greater autonomy. Supporting a transparent, inclusive, and credible election in April, in which Afghan President Hamid Karzai transfers power to an elected Afghan successor, should be the top priority for U.S. and international policymakers. This means that the policymakers outside Afghanistan should:

- Support sound technical processes related to transparency, fairness, and inclusivity, as well as an on-time election, on April 5, 2014.

- Not interfere with the candidates, coalitions or processes, such as by backing one candidate or insisting on a certain platform for candidates. At the same time, they should support dialogue and a level playing field for the election process.
- Monitor and encourage strong and impartial assistance by the Afghan security forces for election security.
- Urge Pakistani military and civilian leaders to cooperate on election security through border closures and other strategies.
- Encourage transparent political dialogue among political candidates—without becoming involved in those discussions—throughout the electoral process, including in first and second rounds to support an inclusive government, not a winner-take-all situation.

In the lead-up to the election, the United States, the European Union, and other international actors should send strong signals to Afghans both inside and outside of Afghanistan regarding their willingness to remain engaged in security and development past 2014. Policymakers should:

- Make the case for why continued U.S. engagement in Afghanistan is important for U.S. and European security interests.
- Acknowledge that international engagement and assistance will depend on a legitimate election process and a Bilateral Strategic Agreement between the United States and Afghanistan.
- Express the intent to maintain a small military presence in Afghanistan to support the Afghan National Security Forces and U.S. counterterrorism imperatives once the BSA is signed.
- Suspend BSA negotiations with President Karzai and attempt to conclude this agreement with President Karzai's successor, given Karzai's refusal to sign the BSA. The leading Afghan presidential candidates have expressed support for the BSA.<sup>38</sup>

Beyond the elections in April, policymakers will need to demonstrate additional support of Afghan actors by:

- Supporting Afghans as they strengthen their economy and build economic bridges with their neighbors and beyond.
- Urging and supporting an inclusive reconciliation process among Afghans that includes insurgent elements and representatives of Afghanistan's diverse communities.
- Providing training, enablers, and advice to Afghanistan's security forces if the BSA is signed.

Given budget concerns in NATO-ISAF-contributing countries and the United States and frustrations with the waste of financial resources in Afghanistan, policymakers will be tempted to turn away from their financial commitments to Afghanistan. While they should demand transparency and accountability for these funds and be willing to reduce funds in a targeted way if those demands are not met, they should not abruptly make significant cuts, as the Afghan state experienced in 1992. Doing so would only increase the likelihood of greater instability in Afghanistan and reverse many of the positive trends that have occurred since 2001.

Many Afghans, especially women, have seen significant and dramatic improvements in their lives since 2001, with increased access to educational opportunities and health care and the establishment of basic governing institutions. Policymakers both in the United States and around the world should attempt to sustain those achievements through support to Afghan stakeholders.

Afghans will be responsible for consolidating the gains, improving their government, and building a more sustainable economy. The continued drawdown of the international community presents opportunities for Afghans to create agreements among each other and with others in the region to find a more sustainable equilibrium in the political, security, and economic spheres.

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