



Peace in Afghanistan: A Chimera?

Afghanistan never fails to flatter to deceive. Just when things look to be on track, unexpected obstacles emerge, and when mired in despair, circumstances take an unexpected turn for the better.

President Ashraf Ghani decided to call a traditional meeting of elders from across the country, called a Loya Jirga, to decide on the release of the last lot of 400 prisoners, out of the 5,000 promised as part of the Doha Agreement signed on February 29.

These releases were to be completed by March 10 but Ghani initially balked on the grounds that the Government of Afghanistan was not a party to the Agreement, which was technically correct but did not stand as the survival of his government is dependent on U.S. support.

There are problems with the Doha Agreement and even greater problems with the expectations that it generated. Doha was never meant to be a peace agreement, it does not even pretend to be one. It explicitly states that it was meant to set the stage for the peace process to start. It is best to understand what Doha is and what it isn't.

One, it is an agreement between the USA and the Taliban, with the caveat that the former does not recognise the latter to be the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Two, the USA agreed to withdraw its troops and that of its allies. In turn, the Taliban agreed to not allow Afghanistan to be a safe haven for international terrorists that target the USA and its allies.

Three, the Taliban agreed to enter into inter-Afghan negotiations on the future governance structure of Afghanistan 'with all Afghan sides'. To facilitate the negotiations, the government of Afghanistan would release 5,000 prisoners from those

held by it and the Taliban would release 1,000 government prisoners. Finally, the cessation of violence would result from successful completion of the intra-Afghan negotiations. The USA agreed to help mobilise support for the reconstruction of the country once a settlement was reached.

Bracing for uncertainty

Doha was not about a cease-fire and the Taliban did not commit itself to an exclusive negotiations. There has been frustration and anguish that violence has not gone away, in fact with a number of high profile attacks on innocent civilians, especially women and children, peace seems further away than before.

**Table: Civilian Casualties,
Jan 1 – June 30, 2009-2020¹**

Year	Total Casualties	Killed
2009	2492	1052
2010	3271	1281
2011	3916	1575
2012	3138	1159
2013	3921	1344
2014	4895	1686
2015	4982	1615
2016	5275	1644
2017	5272	1672
2018	5205	1729
2019	3973	1422
2020	3458	1282

¹ Source: UNAMA, "Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, Mid-Year: 1 January – 30 June", available at https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_poc_midyear_report_2020_-_27_july-.pdf

Though the level of violence is unconscionably high, the position is a bit more nuanced as per the above table of Civilian Casualties compiled by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) would show.

The sad part of the reduction in violence that neither of the two main active participants have reduced the levels of violence. In fact, in actual numbers it has actually gone up for the Afghan government security forces, particularly of the Air Force, whose contribution to civilian casualties has gone up threefold.

Government forces were also responsible for a majority for children casualties. The Taliban, for its part, was seen as responsible for 43% of all casualties.

Ghani's pique and reluctance to release prisoners was understandable but his position was weak. He was arm-twisted into releasing most of the prisoners sought but he has now called a halt, citing lack of powers under the Afghan Constitution to release prisoners convicted of serious offences.

Sagacity of Loya Jirga

He has, therefore, decided to call a meeting of the Loya Jirga from August 7 to find a way out. While the Loya Jirga is a standard method to sort out disputes, the method of selection of delegates and inclusiveness is a matter of judgement. It is unclear how a meeting called at a couple of days' notice would be credible and representative.

The USA's Special Representative, while acknowledging that the Loya Jirga, could 'legitimise' the decision to release the balance prisoners, warned the Loya Jirga not to be misled by those who want to perpetuate the status quo and sabotage the peace process. In other words, if the Loya Jirga does not facilitate the beginning of the peace process, then the USA would look for other options.

The Taliban is going through its own turmoil, appointing the son of its charismatic founder Mullah Omar as its head of military operations. It also announced a 3 day cease fire at the time of Eid-ul-Adha, only the third such occasion in the last 18 years

of conflict.

Mullah Haibatullah, the head of the Taliban, in his Eid message refuted allegations that his organisation was facing dissent, with rebels allegedly joining the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K). This was necessary because there was a feeling that the rise of the IS-K was partly attributable to recalcitrant Taliban, who were not happy with the peace process.

Factually, as per UNAMA report, violence by the IS-K is actually down. He made two other important points indicating the need for public acceptance. One, the Taliban was not working towards a monopoly of power. The new dispensation would be representative of all Afghans, acknowledging minority rights implicitly. Two, the education system would cover all Afghans, again implicitly accepting the rights of women to education but shying away from stating it explicitly.

An intricate dimension

The joker in the pack remains Pakistan, which has sheltered and allowed the Taliban to rise again, even as it ostensibly is allied with the USA in the Global War on Terror (GWOT). The USA has financially supported it directly (over US\$ 35 billion and counting) and leaned on the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to extend concessional finance that has kept Pakistan afloat.

An unstable and insecure Afghanistan makes Pakistan's relevant as the only player capable of bringing the Taliban to the negotiations table indispensable.

There are too many imponderables that can shift the narrative in Afghanistan. Can Pakistan afford a stable Afghanistan, even with its ally, the Taliban in the drivers' seat? Or would it prop up the IS-K to play the role of a spoiler in case the Taliban get serious about actually reaching a peace deal with the government of Afghanistan?

And would the non-Taliban sides including the Afghan government, get their act together and ensure that the gains of post-2001 Afghanistan including women and minority rights are secure?

This Policy Note is written by Shakti Sinha, Honorary Director, Atal Bihari Vajpayee Institute of Policy Research and International Studies, Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Vadodara.