



Afghanistan in November 2016

Politics

This month the National Unity Government was thrown into disarray following the dismissal of seven ministers by the Lower House of Parliament. Criticised for failing to spend at least 70% of their respective departmental development budgets, 16 ministers were summoned to Parliament to face a vote of confidence. The high-ranking Foreign Minister was amongst the seven subsequently sacked. Condemning Parliament's actions in light of ongoing nationwide insecurity, President Ghani called on dismissed ministers to continue working in their positions until the Supreme Court had reviewed relevant articles of the constitution.

November also finally saw the appointment of new electoral commissioners – a key step in the process of long-awaited electoral reform. On the 22nd, President Ghani and CEO Abdullah officially swore in 12 new commissioners – seven to sit on the Independent Election Commission, and five on the Independent Election Complaint Commission. Three of these new commissioners were women. A few days later, a controversial move by President Ghani to appoint the previous set of electoral commissioners as personal advisors drew criticism from independent monitoring organisations.

Peace and Security

On the 3rd, 32 civilians in the city of Kunduz were killed following US-backed airstrikes intended to support Afghan security forces in their defence of the city from the Taliban. With the incident provoking national and international outcry, the UN announced its plans to launch an official investigation.

A number of high-profile terrorist attacks contributed to ongoing insecurity and record numbers of both military and civilian casualties in 2016. On the 10th, the Taliban attacked the German Consulate in Mazar-i-Sherif, killing four and wounding at least 128. A few days later, the Taliban also claimed responsibility for a bombing at the NATO airbase in Bagram, which killed four and injured 17.

Islamic State (IS) forces continued to threaten residents of the capital through a series of deadly attacks. On the 16th, IS targeted a vehicle belonging to the Afghan security forces in Kabul, killing 6. On the 21st, the group was also behind a suicide bombing at a mosque, killing 32 and injuring at least 50. Targeting Shia Muslims commemorating the religious ceremony of Arbaeen, the bombing came 40 days after the holiday of Ashura, during which Shias had also been targeted in a similar incident. These twin attacks caused national and international human rights organisations to publicly call on the government to do more in their protection of minorities at such public occasions.

On the 14th, President Ghani asked the UN to add Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada – the Taliban's new leader - to its sanctions list. This move was considered a further blow to the stalled peace process, as one of the insurgency's key conditions for negotiations is the removal of senior commanders from such international black lists.

Rights

The International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists was marked on the 2nd, in the context of the deadliest year on record for Afghans working in media. The death of Nematullah Zaheer on the 4th brought the total number of journalists murdered in 2016 to 12. In recognition of the deteriorating conditions faced by journalists in Afghanistan, the Agence France-Presse awarded its prestigious annual Kate Webb award to TOLONews outlet on the 25th.

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The refugee Sharbat Gula, made famous by a 1980s National Geographic cover, was welcomed back to Afghanistan by the President on the 9th following her arrest and deportation from Pakistan. Heralded by many as a public example of the current situation Afghan refugees face in Pakistan, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees now reports that over 85,000 families have been forced to return over the course of 2016.

On the 30th, the Lower House of Parliament rejected a cooperation agreement between Afghanistan and Sweden over the return of Afghan asylum seekers. 117 of 123 present MPs voted against the agreement on grounds of protecting the human rights of asylum seekers.

The worldwide 16 days of activism against gender-based violence was marked in Afghanistan through the signing of symbolic pledges by President Ghani, CEO Abdullah and key government ministries. Meanwhile, the attorney general's office has recorded over 3,700 cases of violence against women in the first 8 months of 2016 – an increase on previous years.

Humanitarian and Development

A report by the US Special Investigator General for Afghanistan Reconstruction has highlighted high levels of absenteeism in schools. Despite increased enrolment being one of Afghanistan's success stories over the past 15 years, it was found that only 23% of those officially registered at schools in Herat attended when inspected by the organisation. The report also noted poor standards in the upkeep and structural integrity of local school buildings.

The Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industries has warned of tough economic times ahead due to a substantial decrease in domestic and foreign investment. Reporting a 59% drop in comparison to the same time period in 2015, it is said that investors have been deterred by increasing security threats and a failure to tackle corruption.

In more positive news, Afghanistan's transport links with its neighbouring countries have been strengthened amidst hopes for greater regional trade and co-operation. The Afghanistan-Turkmenistan railway was inaugurated on the 28th, linking the two countries for the first time. Current plans are to extend the line onwards through other Central Asian countries to reach the Black and Mediterranean Seas – constituting, as the president of Turkmenistan was quoted, the revival of the "great Silk Road".

On the 29th, the Taliban announced that they would support and protect national development projects, including those regarding new gas, electricity and extractive industries. This announcement had a lukewarm reception amongst Afghans, as the group had in the past similarly vowed to avoid civilian casualties. Afghan government also suggested that actions speak louder than words.

People and Culture

The second annual Afghan international marathon was held on the 4th, set amongst the backdrop of the famous Buddha statues in Bamyan. The only mixed gender sporting event in the country, it involved not only international competitors but also a small group of female Afghan runners.

Similarly, the second annual female entrepreneur exposition opened in Kabul on the 23rd, featuring 35 booths showcasing products from businesses owned by women. An Afghan woman was also one of the winners of the UK's Women in Innovation award. Dr Shakardokht Jafari was honoured for her role in the discovery and commercialisation of an accurate, inexpensive way of monitoring radiation during cancer treatment.