



Afghanistan in February 2014

Elections – let the preliminaries begin

The two months of campaigning for the Presidential and Provincial Council elections started on the 2nd. Electoral rallies, TV debates between the lead contestants and social media campaigns have stimulated the political activism.

Despite a bleak start, campaigning has been relatively peaceful. On the very first day, two of Abdullah Abdullah's campaigners were shot dead by unknown gunmen in Herat. On the 19th, his caravan was ambushed by insurgents in Kabul-Jalalabad highway. No casualties were reported. On the 20th, a suicide attacker targeted a building in Kabul housing one of Ashraf Ghani's offices, killing the guard and wounding many civilians.

Drama has been in abundant supply. There have been rows over campaign team members switching sides, and the use of public resources in the electoral campaigns. On the 15th, the Electoral Complaint Commission fined Ashraf Ghani for misuse of government vehicles, while Abdul Rab Sayyaf received a written warning for the same infraction.

President Karzai, having publically avoided proclaiming support to any specific candidate, was involved in a jirga (gathering) of Kandahar leaders. The aim of the jirga - a sort of preliminary - was to create a coalition between Zalami Rassoul, Qayoum Karzai and other candidates originating from Kandahar. It finished without any consensus.

Security – efforts at risk

Security incidents continued to threaten various parts of the country. On the 23rd, in one of the deadliest attacks on the Afghan army, the Taliban in Kunar killed 21 and kidnapped 6 Afghan soldiers. The incident generated unprecedented outpour of Afghan anger against Taliban. Protestors in Kabul called on the President to repeal a decree that disallows Afghan forces from seeking aerial support from NATO while fighting insurgents in residential areas. A week earlier, Baktash Siawash, a young parliamentarian, joined civil society representatives in setting up a protest camp in Kabul demanding more government support for the Afghan army.

Three days later, the US President reportedly advised his Afghan counterpart that the 'zero option' was still on the table – suggesting a complete withdrawal of US forces at the end of 2014. Playing down the warning, Afghan officials said that the US agreed to sign the security pact (BSA) with the next Afghan President. The US government also said that if legal protections in the BSA were ensured, their preferred option will be to leave behind a residual force to train and support Afghan forces.

On the 20th, a non-profit strategy analysis organisation Centre for Naval Analyses recommended that the size of residual forces be proportionate to the size of the Afghan military. The Centre had further warned that shrinking the size of Afghan security forces from current 382,000 to 228,500 would put at risk the US efforts to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for extremists.

Cost of Conflict – Afghans vs. Afghans

On the 8th, the UN reported a 14% rise in the number of civilians killed or injured in 2013. The report considered armed opposition groups responsible for the majority (74%) and Afghan and international forces for 11% of casualties in 2013. 10% of casualties resulted from engagements between pro and anti-government forces while the remaining 5% were unattributed. With international forces responsible for only 3% of casualties, it seems an increasingly Afghans vs. Afghans scenario.

Civilian deaths were fewer than the peak year of 2011. But combined deaths and injuries (8,615 persons) have been the highest since United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan started such records in 2009.

Compared to 2012, there were 25% more people – 124,354 – forced out of their homes. The total number of internally displaced people is now 631,286.

Peace – not in sight so far

Promising yet confusing reports about talks with the Taliban spread in February. On the 17th, the Afghan Government confirmed that talks with former and current Taliban members were being held in Dubai. A leading negotiator from the Taliban side was Agha Jan

Mutassim, their finance minister whose current links with the group is unclear. The US government was also reported to have revived talks on prisoner swap with the Taliban in Qatar.

In what Afghan officials described as efforts to thwart peace talks, unknown gunmen in Pakistan shot dead Mawlawi Abdul Raqib Takhari, a former Taliban minister considered to be in favour of negotiations. His body was transferred by Afghanistan army aircraft to Takhar, much to the anger of some political actors in Afghanistan. In the meantime, the High Peace Council, under pressure from Afghan civil society, suspended Shahzada Masoud, one of the Council's spokespersons, after he had called Osama bin Laden a martyr.

Rights

On the 4th, Afghan civil society protested that the new Criminal Prosecution Code passed by the Parliament impedes women's access to justice. Article 26 of the law bans the voluntary testimony of relatives against an accused person. On the 10th, Catherine Ashton, EU's foreign policy chief, joined the debate and called on the Afghan government to amend the Code. She said the law is a 'serious backward step' for the rights of Afghan women and girls. In response, on the 17th, the Afghan Cabinet decided that the Code would be amended.

On Valentine's Day, hundreds of women's rights activists marched in Kabul demanding the prosecution of women's rights violators. This was part of global campaign One Billion Rising. Among their demands was abolishing 'Toyana', an amount of money the groom's family has to pay to the bride's family. In some parts of the country Toyana – a non-Islamic but ingrained custom - is as high as \$10,000.

On the 20th, Sabza, a policewoman in Baghlan, was murdered by her husband. It is unclear what the motive of the crime has been as the perpetrator remains elusive.

On the 20th, vocational training institutions said the number of children seeking work has grown significantly over the past year. Unconfirmed statistics put the number of Afghan child labourers at almost one million.

Aid and Development – ending the war economy, not the war

On the 9th, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) announced a \$300 million initiative aimed to minimise the economic lull when war funding ends in 2014. Specifically, the initiative will support the food sector, domestic revenue, Afghanistan's membership of the World Trade Organisation and youth employability.

On the 25th, Doctors Without Borders (MSF) reported a big gap between official reports and healthcare realities in Afghanistan. The report finds that one in five of the 800 respondents had a family member or a close friend who died in the last year due to a lack of access to medical care. Conducted in four mostly restive areas of Helmand, Khost, Kunduz and Kabul, the research highlights the raging conflict compounding a failure to meet rising medical humanitarian needs.

On the 12th a top UN official announced that \$406 million is required by the UN and its humanitarian partners to meet the most acute needs of Afghanistan in 2014. He warned that as international attention is diverted to other crisis such as Syria and South Sudan, among others, there is a fear that 'Afghanistan could become a forgotten emergency'.

On the 5th, the Afghan cabinet sacked Tamim Nuristani, the governor of Nuristan, over graft allegations. He and two more provincial officials were accused of misusing hundreds of tons of wheat allocated to the province as part of an emergency response programme. Denying the charges, the accused officials called it a political conspiracy against them.

Culture and people - hats off

Afghan cricket started March 2014 with impressive performance. On the 17th, Afghanistan's youngsters stunned the mighty Australia by securing a 36-run victory in cricket's Under-19 World Cup. The Australian squad included Jake Doran, who played and impressed against England during the Ashes tour last year. Afghanistan team secured 7th place in the tournament.

On the 1st March Afghanistan's national cricket team, an associate member of International Cricket Council (ICC) defeated for the first time a full-member nation. Beating Bangladesh by 32 runs in the Asia Cup, Afghanistan surprised cricket lovers as it was only the country's 4th one-day international match.

On the 8th, a two-day handicraft exhibition Mashq-e-Tawanaee (Exercise of Ability) was inaugurated in Kabul. Displaying pieces made by people with disabilities, the show aimed at raising awareness about handicapped people and marketing their products.