



Afghanistan in March 2015

Politics

After a brief hiatus, March saw a buzzing political scene as the current Afghan parliament started their last term, President Ghani took his third trip to Saudi Arabia and the Afghan leaders went for their first US trip. In Riyadh, Ghani met with recently-inducted Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz to discuss the Afghan peace talks.

On the 23rd, Ghani and CEO Abdullah began a five-day tour in the US to 'reset the bilateral narrative' between the two nations. During a Joint Congressional address, Ghani charmed those present as he thanked US soldiers for advancing the cause of freedom in Afghanistan and paid homage to the 2,200 American servicemen and women for their sacrifices. He also acknowledged the American taxpayers who provided for schools and wells and aid workers for their work such as curing the sick.

After a daylong meeting with Ghani, Obama announced a new delayed timeline in the withdrawal of 9,800 American troops, who will now remain in Afghanistan until at least the end of 2015. Obama had earlier planned half of these to pull out. The US also announced they would fund Afghan forces through 2017, and will provide \$800 million in aid for the Afghan government's reform agenda. Ghani finished off his visit by receiving the Atlantic Council's *Distinguished Leadership Award* for his visionary and transformative role in the past six months. He is the first Asian head of state to receive it.

On the 21st, the long-awaited cabinet nominations resumed as the names of 16 nominees, four of whom are women, were made public. No one has been named for the Minister of Defense position yet. Ghani's office also announced the formation of the Special Electoral Reform Commission. An Afghan electoral watchdog group has criticised that most members of the Commission lack technical expertise, while the CEO aired opposition about its nominated chair, Shukria Barakzai.

On the 16th, the UN Security Council extended the mandate of The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) for another twelve months.

Peace

After an initial bout of optimism about the Taliban being ready to talk peace in their Qatar office, March did not see much progress. Critics, including several Mujahideen leaders and MPs, voiced concern over the lack of transparency and inclusivity of the peace talk preparations. Similarly, civil society groups demanded Afghan women be given a genuine place at the negotiating table.

On the 26th Ghani acknowledged that addressing the legitimate grievances of the Taliban over torture and ill-treatment is a necessary step. He also said that the Taliban needs to choose to be with Al Qaeda or to be with Afghans. Promising signals hailed from Pakistan, where the Pakistani Ulema Council pressed for successful peace talks. They had previously justified suicide bombings and jihad in Afghanistan, so this was a significant turn-about. Not much was seen from the Pakistani military and civil government to support the peace talks. Former President Karzai and many MPs remain openly suspicious of Pakistan's intentions.

Security

Minority groups continued to face growing insecurity. In a rare attack on a Sufi mosque in Kabul, 11 were killed. In separate incidents, at least 33 more members of Shia Baloch and Hazara minorities were abducted in Ghazni, Daikundi and Balkh, 29 of whom were later released. But families of the 30 Hazaras kidnapped in Zabul 38 days ago say they know nothing about their situation or the security forces' operation to rescue them. Worried Hazara elders in Ghazni have appealed to their old enemies, the Taliban, for protection against the alleged Islamic State fighters.

Afghan roads got even more dangerous in March. On the 24th, masked gunmen attacked vehicles on Kabul-Kandahar road. They took at least 13 people - including a woman - off a bus and shot them dead. Roadside mine blasts killed 14 civilians this month, while at least 27 civilians were killed and scores more were injured in Taliban attacks in Helmand and Kabul.

Rights

On the 19th, two days before the Afghan New Year Nowruz celebrations, 27 year-old Farkhunda was brutally murdered by a mob outside of Shah-e-Do Shamshera Mosque in Kabul. She was falsely accused of burning a Quran. Bystanders captured and shared on social media the footage and photos of attackers violently beating Farkhunda, setting her on fire, and throwing her body into the Kabul River.

This tragic incident shook Afghans at home and abroad, inspiring protests in all major Afghan cities. Afghan diaspora groups organised vigils and gatherings in the UK, US, Germany, Canada, Australia, India, Kyrgyzstan, to name a few. In a never-before-seen act of solidarity, women including her family and rights activists carried Farkhunda's coffin and laid her body to rest, allowing no man to touch it. They also forced a mullah who had earlier condoned the violence to leave the ceremony. Women's presence in the burial proceedings in Afghanistan is generally considered taboo.

In response, government and parliamentary fact-finding teams were appointed. The Attorney General's Office announced that 46 suspects, including 19 police personnel have been arrested so far. On the 30th, CEO Abdullah asked the people to be patient and let the law enforcement agencies deliver due justice.

On the 3rd, Human Rights Watch profiled 8 'strongmen' linked to police, intelligence, and militia forces responsible for gross violations of human rights abuses. Among the most notable are Atta Mohammad Noor, the current Governor of Balkh and Lt. Gen. Abdul Raziq, Kandahar Police Chief.

In a timely decision CEO Abdullah pledged to review the case against jailed Afghan journalist Najibullah Musafir days before Nai, an independent media group, released a report showing a 60% increase in violence against journalists in 2014. Musafir was sentenced to six months in prison for taking a photo of a female basketball player in a public function and later selling it for commercial purposes. Laws regarding intellectual property in Afghanistan are vague and rarely enforced.

Development and Humanitarian

Detrimental fresh snowfall and more avalanches hit the Panjshir Valley, Badghis, and Nangarhar. This set back relief efforts as electricity supplies are waning. More than 300 died across the country and at least 12 lost their lives in subsequent landslides in February and March. An estimated 440 buildings collapsed due to snowfall. The IOM has launched a new three year, \$9 million project to support disaster risk management efforts in the country.

The repatriation crisis deepened with an estimated 52,000 Afghans returning from Pakistan in 10 weeks alone. Mass movements from Pakistan followed the introduction of Pakistan's new anti-terrorism plan which places pressures on Afghans to leave. Meanwhile the Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation was forced to cut their budget down to a mere \$250,000 for the current financial year.

Culture and people

On the 6th, Captain Nilofar Rahmani, the first female fixed-wing pilot in the Afghan Air Force, was presented the *International Women of Courage* award. She was awarded this US Department of State's prize for defying Taliban and family threats to inspire more women to join the air force.

The Afghan Cricketers were warmly received back in Kabul after attending their debut World Cup. They returned with one victory and a lot of new lessons. They played six matches including against the dominant Australia who beat the co-host New Zealand to lift the world cup for the fifth time.