



Afghanistan in September 2015

Politics

On the 28th, the National Unity Government (NUG) completed its first year. Some key government positions including the Ministry of Defence and Attorney General are still run by acting heads, indicators of the complications of a coalition government in Afghanistan.

Whilst the NUG inherited the quandaries of insecurity and corruption from the previous government, it faced many of its own including the cash crisis, lowered international military support, and increasing unemployment. This year saw greater civilian casualties, a more emboldened insurgency, waning government writ and greater numbers of young 'hearts and minds' fleeing the country. The opinion polls of this year have clearly shown the growing public dissatisfaction. The NUG's major achievement, however, has been the improved political ties with Western powers and China, as well as improving the prospects of regional economic cooperation.

On the 3rd, President Ghani approved seven of the eleven recommendations proposed by the Electoral Reform Commission and urged that the remaining recommendations are reconsidered. Approved recommendations include removal of the current members of the Independent Election Commission, and allocating 25% of provincial and district council seats to women. Ministry of Justice said they have amended the pertinent elections laws. It is unclear whether the amendments will need parliamentary approval given that the parliament's current session is not strictly constitutional.

Security

The highlight, or low point, of September was the Taliban's capture of the strategic province of Kunduz in north-eastern Afghanistan. After months of besieging the city, early on the morning of 28th Taliban fighters overran the security posts to mark their biggest military victory since they were ousted 14 years ago. They captured public buildings and military vehicles and raised their white flags in key parts of the city. They also freed about 500 prisoners. The provincial officials and security forces retreated to the city's outlying airport.

It is estimated that some 7,000 Afghan forces and militiamen were present in the city, whilst the number of Taliban attackers are put in the hundreds. The head of Afghanistan's intelligence agency said a clear lack of coordination is responsible for this setback, and vowed a quick recapture of Kunduz. This also brings into question the efficacy of militiamen in keeping the Taliban at bay.

On the 29th, American warplanes struck Taliban positions, halting their advance towards the airport. They also tried to resupply a group of Afghan soldiers defending the Bala Hisar fortress. NATO advisers joined the Afghan forces in their ground mission to retake the city. However, they were blocked by Taliban-laid land mines. By the 30th, the Taliban had strengthened their grip on the city and captured Bala Hisar. Hundreds of Afghan special forces commenced a full-scale operation against the Taliban in the thick darkness of that night. President Ghani said the Taliban have used Kunduzi citizens as human shields. Commentators claim that even as the Afghan government recaptures the city swiftly, the Taliban have already achieved their booty and publicity objectives.

On the 30th, the UN announced that so far over 100 civilians have been killed or injured whilst another 6,000 have been displaced during the fight in Kunduz. Medical charity Medecins Sans Frontieres said its hospital in the city had been overwhelmed, with scores of patients suffering gunshot wounds.

Other northern and north-eastern provinces also came under threat of the Taliban. A deal signed between officials and local elders in the neighbouring Baghlan province is feared to provide more grounds to the Taliban. According to the deal, Afghan forces will cease further operations in Dand-e-Ghori area. In return, local elders will prevent the Taliban from operating there. Commentators say such a deal will leave local populations exposed to Taliban atrocities. Control of Raghistan district in Badakhshan switched between the Taliban and the Afghan Government in early September.

On the 17th, Afghan forces said they had destroyed a major insurgent base in Logar. Active for over nine years, the camp was used as a safe haven and training camp by the Taliban. At least 28 attacks were planned from that camp for Kabul alone. A few days earlier, a local Logar police commander criticised former President Karzai for ordering him not to target Taliban centres in certain parts of the province.

Other southern and eastern provinces also came under attack. On the 14th, the Taliban attacked a Ghazni prison, releasing 355 inmates. Days before the attack, twenty Taliban commanders imprisoned in Ghazni were transferred to Kabul. On the 27th, local authorities reported that hundreds of IS-affiliated fighters staged a pre-dawn attack against key security outposts in the border areas of Nangarhar. This is IS's first reported major assault. Faced with strong resistance from the Afghan army, they suffered heavy casualties and retreated.

Rights

NAI, an independent media watchdog, reported concerns over growing censorship of journalists. Their study found that 72% of their respondents throughout Afghanistan say they are censored on a regular basis by local powerbrokers, government officials, their own editors and the Taliban. NAI also said that 23 media workers fled Afghanistan collectively on the 14th to seek asylum in Europe.

A citizen group arranged a demonstration in Kabul to protest against the growing unemployment. 'We are not Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara or Uzbek; we are all jobless' was their slogan.

On the 23rd, Ghani vowed a crack-down on abuse of boys by powerful individuals. He said boys as young as six-years old are raped and, 'to the extent to which the authority of the state can be harnessed', he will stop this practice. The sexual abuse of boys referred to as *Bachabazji* (playing with boys) is widespread in many parts of Afghanistan.

At least 800 female students in Herat visited the central hospital over ten days after fears about poisoning spread in the city. Physicians say they noted symptoms of breathing problems among 10% of the students, whilst the remaining students were simply suffering from shock.

Development & Humanitarian

Kabul hosted two important events in September: the sixth Regional Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan and the Senior Officials Meeting. The latter was the follow-up meeting to the 2014 London Conference on Afghanistan and discussed how international aid can be used to support Afghanistan's self-reliance.

On the 10th, the UN Food and Agricultural Organization released a joint assessment about food insecurity in Afghanistan. It warned against an 'extremely alarming trend' of food shortages in the country. The number of Afghans resorting to selling land or turning to friends or family for help because of food insecurity has doubled in the last year.

Anja de Beer, a Dutch aid worker who was abducted on 22nd June from Kabul, was released after 81 days. She said her abductors had given her food and drink and had treated her well. The kidnappers were not identified. Afghanistan remains one of the most dangerous places for aid workers.

People and Culture

Aqeela Asifi, an Afghan teacher living in Pakistan, won the UNHCR Nansen Refugee Award. A refugee herself, she established a tent-school 23 years ago in a camp in Punjab. So far she has transformed the lives of more than 1,000 girl students who have reached eighth grade and received a nationally endorsed certificate. 'Asifi is a true symbol of triumph over adversary' says the UN statement, adding that with quiet patience she has offered young refugees 'a pathway out of poverty and a chance to build themselves a future'.

Afghanistan's national paragliding team took to skies for the first time on the 22nd. The activity was an unusual sight for the teenage onlookers who clapped and shouted as the wind took the craft into the sky. Female team member Zakia Mohammadi, 21, said 'when I went up to the sky, I thought I was a bird which had just been freed from a cage'.

The Afghan women's 2015 football premier league kicked off in Kabul on the 22nd. Four teams compete for the title in the second annual event. Attendance has been open for women and families.