

## COMMENT 202 - Intra-Afghan-Peace Talks (III): Pakistan's push for an interim government in Afghanistan

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As discussed in an earlier [SADF Comment](#), one of the immediate aims of Pakistan's Afghan policy is the establishment of an [interim government](#) in Kabul. [In March 2018](#), Prime Minister Imran Khan presented the idea of forming a transitional authority 'representing the entire people of Afghanistan'. This call for a 'new government', combined with the portraying of the then head of the so-called [National Unity Government](#) Ashraf Ghani as a major obstacle for national reconciliation and peace negotiations in Afghanistan, created harsh criticisms among the country's political leadership. However, Pakistani authorities still and persistently broach the topic – especially in times of rising tensions between Islamabad and Kabul. Now, amidst the [current debate](#) among decision makers in the US<sup>1</sup> and NATO regarding either a troop withdrawal or a potential extension of [military presence](#), and faced with a [stalled process](#) of talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban,<sup>2</sup> the notion of an interim government becomes crucial.

With an interim government Pakistan hopes to minimise the risks emerging from current developments in Afghanistan. More concretely, the Pakistani civilian and

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<sup>1</sup> On Thursday, January 28, 2021, the [Pentagon stated](#) that the Biden administration 'would not commit to a full drawdown of US troops from Afghanistan by May' because the 'Taliban have not met their commitments' they made in their deal with the United States.

<sup>2</sup> It is reported that negotiations teams of the Taliban and GIROA failed to find a common ground on essential issues. For example, the GIROA insists that a [ceasefire must be a priority](#) in the talks, while the Taliban want to discuss a ceasefire only [after an agreement](#) on power-sharing and the subsequent shape of a future government, understood as the forming of a '[new order](#)'.

military leadership fears spill-over effects in border areas, particularly as regards a further escalation of violence in a new Afghan civil war scenario. Furthermore, Islamabad worries of domestic unrest stirred by Islamist groups, as well as potential losses in international reputational gains achieved through the support of the Intra-Afghan-Peace Talks/Afghan Peace Negotiations (APN) – for the Taliban may now suspend the Doha agreement. Additional threats are linked with another failure - or delay - of envisaged connectivity projects due to the deteriorating security situation in Pakistan’s western neighbourhood, which could make a smooth access to Central Asian states impossible.

However, as indicated above, the proposal for an interim government is highly controversial. Its proponents<sup>3</sup> point out that it is the only option ‘[to break the current deadlock](#)’ in the APN, particularly since the [Taliban does not show any interest](#) in joining the current political system in general and the [GIROA in particular](#). Both are identified by the Taliban as the [products of foreign occupation](#). According to an observer, it is clear that the ‘[Taliban refuses to recognize Ghani’s government as legitimate](#)’ and won’t accept his rule. The insurgency movement identifies Ghani as a U.S. ‘puppet’ and [rejects him](#) as president as well as leader of a transitional authority. Moreover, the [GIROA will not join](#) a Taliban government either. There are [rising calls](#) for ‘[President Ashraf Ghani to step down and an interim government to take over](#)’. Critics believe peace talks will not be successful as long as Ghani is in power.<sup>4</sup> Instead [they argue that a transitional set-up](#) could pave the way for a political settlement that includes power distribution, measures of constitutional engineering, and a reduction in violence. It is interesting to note that most promoters of an interim government seem not to be aware of how far they reject not only the Ghani administration or the constitution themselves, but also the system of governance as a whole.

However, Ghani [rules out](#) apriori<sup>5</sup> the formation of an interim government. Instead, he insists on [completing his five-year term in office](#) (running through 2024) and

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<sup>3</sup> Besides Pakistan, the idea of an interim government was floated (more or less ‘privately’) by U.S. officials, Pakistan, and several Afghan politicians – and has been for some time supported by the Taliban’s political leadership.

<sup>4</sup> In a very recent statement, Abbas Stanekzai, deputy head of the Taliban negotiation team stated that that Ghani’s government is the ‘[only hurdle](#)’ for the Afghan peace process.

<sup>5</sup> Apparently, President Ghani is not at all willing to discuss the idea of a transitional government.

states that his [‘basic goal is to be able to hand power, through the will of the people, to his elected successor’](#). He claims that his presidency [‘is not mine. This seat belongs to the nation of Afghanistan. This system has dignity. You all voted for me’](#). Furthermore, he sees the electoral transfer of power not only as a [legally-constitutional commitment](#) by his administration but also as the way to achieve a [“positive peace” with the Taliban](#). Both domestic and international advocates of an interim government describe Ghani’s behaviour as a [‘clinging to power’](#) which undermines ‘negotiated and peaceful settlement’ and leads to further violence.

Others hold that the replacement of the current government through an interim administration government would constitute a [‘dangerous, irresponsible gambit that would benefit an assortment of opportunistic politicians eager to grab a share in power’](#). Moreover, a change in government is described by critics (most of who support Ghani) [‘as premature and a risky ploy’](#) enforcing the dissolution of the constitution, chaos and state collapse. It is highly questionable whether an interim authority would be able to oversee a significant reduction of violence – that is, a comprehensive ceasefire allowing the warring parties to reach a political settlement.

With these discussions in mind, it does seem that Pakistan does not ponder much beyond pushing for an interim government in Afghanistan – especially not regarding the practicalities of its implementation. One may ask (a question among so many): if an interim government is the preferred way to overcome the current Afghan imbroglio, what is Islamabad’s plan of action to ensure one is formed? This issue will prove crucial if and when Afghanistan is drawn into civil war once more.

The Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan [is yet to provide](#) any concrete suggestions regarding how to form an interim government. Besides describing their push for an interim government as [‘brotherly advice’](#), neither Imran Khan and his administration provide any further explanation regarding which concrete structure, purpose and mission - or any special function - this transitional authority should have. Here, it is insightful to assess Pakistan’s latest policy moves regarding Afghanistan. One should expect the Pakistani authorities to continue reaching out

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He even refused to meet with US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad during his visit to Kabul early January 2021 over the matter.

to Afghan oppositional party leaders and other political figures representing all ethnic groups. For example, Pakistan already interacts with [Gulbuddin Hekmatyar](#), leader of the Hezb-e Islami; [Salahuddin Rabbani](#), head of the Jamaat-e-Islami; [Latif Pedram](#), the founder and leader of the Afghanistan National Congress Party and founder of the Tajik's Council of Afghanistan; and Mohammad [Karim Khalili](#), a Hazara from the Hezb-e Wahdat-e Islami Afghanistan; among others. Pakistan's obvious plan is to form an inclusive, multi-ethnic political alliance - in clear demarcation to the Doha process - aiming at the establishment of a transitional government. To achieve this under current conditions will be extremely difficult. Perhaps the prospects of another civil war or a similarly severe state of affairs might help bring those rivalling Afghan political figures – all collaborating with Pakistan – together.

Islamabad most likely considers two options to realise its vision of an interim authority. Firstly, negotiations between this newly formed 'alliance' and the Ghani administration as well as the Taliban – with Pakistan as key facilitator. This could also include the option of a third-party mediation (here, Islamabad might lobby for the United Nations to become involved). Secondly, promoting the call for a Loya Jirga (grand council<sup>6</sup>). The latter is most likely not the preferred choice, since Pakistan is afraid that this will provide Iran with additional leverage due to its persistently growing influence over various Taliban factions and other (ethnic) groups. Such developments might limit Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan in general. Of course, much depends on Pakistan's ability to influence the Taliban to accept either a third-party mitigation or the convening of a Loya Jirga.

Besides these political-diplomatic measures, the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) will continue to provide military support to the Taliban and other militant groups so as to maintain its influence in Afghanistan as well as pressure the Ghani administration to comply with the set-up of an interim government.

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<sup>6</sup> A Loya Jirga is a traditional gathering of Afghan tribal elders, religious figures, and political leaders representing the various ethnic, religious, and tribal communities in the country. Although not an official decision-making body (since their decisions are not legally binding), it is recognized the "highest expression" of the Afghan people – and it is expected that both the president and the parliament respect its rulings as 'final'. From a historical perspective a Loya Jirga '[has been used to approve a new constitution, declare war, choose a new king, and make sweeping social or political reforms](#)'. The last Loya Jirga was held in 7–9 August 2020, so as to [decide the fate of 400 Taliban prisoners](#) in order to initiate the peace talks between the GIROA and the Taliban (Doha process).

In sum, it is doubtful that the formation of an interim government will lead to a political settlement of the war in Afghanistan. First, the [‘Taliban have not yet formally called for an interim government’](#). Second, the Taliban are apparently in a process of fragmentation – losing their internal cohesion. The political leadership leaning towards negotiation seems to be losing control over field commanders. The latter in turn are aware of their rising military strength and ability to make trade-offs with both regional and international actors capable of providing wider resources – these forces are therefore more interested in pursuing a military victory. Consequently, according to observers, the premature formation of an interim government under the current circumstances in Afghanistan – as is suggested by Pakistan – would [‘only set the stage for the collapse of the current republican system’](#). The achievements of the last two decades would be lost – and more violence could ensue.

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