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The Coming Political Crisis in Afghanistan

By Abdul Basit

Synopsis

The prevailing political deadlock and constitutional crisis in Afghanistan can be detrimental to the country's nascent democratic process. If a pragmatic solution through a fresh political agreement is not found, it will undermine the legitimacy of the National Unity Government (NUG).

Commentary

AS AFGHANISTAN'S National Unity Government (NUG) nears the end of its two-year term in office, it is confronted with a serious political deadlock and constitutional crisis. The future of the NUG depends on how it handles the unfolding political situation. A mishandling of the crisis can be detrimental for Afghanistan's incipient democratic process and political cohesion.

The two-year power-sharing deal brokered by the US Secretary of State John Kerry in September 2014 between President Ashraf Ghani and the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Dr. Abdullah Abdullah will expire on 30 September. According to the agreement, the NUG was required to introduce a number of political and electoral reforms within two years to pave the way for parliamentary elections, followed by the convening of the constitutional Loya Jirga (grand assembly of the tribal elders). This is to amend the constitution to transform the CEO's office into the office of the prime minister. However, given the dysfunctional nature of the NUG, the Ghani-Abdullah duo could not honour their commitments. In the light of this, the political future of the NUG remains uncertain. If the required constitutional amendments are not introduced in time, it could split the two leaders.

Ghani-Abdullah Differences Spill Over

The political bickering and differences between Ghani and Abdullah is an open secret. However, the situation took an ugly turn in August when Abdullah publicly criticised Ghani in a press conference. Abdullah censured Ghani for not meeting him for the last three months and declared him unfit to run the country. Abdullah's tone became particularly harsher towards Ghani when the latter unilaterally nominated Ahmed Yousuf Nuristani as head of the Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan and Nader Naderi as chairman of the Public Service Commission. Ghani responded by calling Abdullah irresponsible and violating the spirit of governance.

Ahead of the approaching deadline, Abdullah, and his supporters are demanding political concessions, financial incentives and a greater share in key ministries for future support and cooperation. They are also asking Ghani to give up his centralised and micro-managing style of governing. They feel sidelined from the decision-making process.

Arguably, Ghani's unaccommodating nature and his bureaucratic style of governance stem from his weak political background and previous career as an international development expert. He does not come from a political family in Afghanistan and he is unaware of the local dynamics and intricacies of the ethnic and tribal politics of Afghanistan. Both his opponents and allies consider him as a technocrat rather than a politician.

Ghani's weak political credentials and absence of a local constituency has somewhat isolated him in the context of local Afghan politics. He also has the reputation of one who lectures his ministers rather than listening to their complaints and solving their problems.

Karzai and three Anti-Government Alliances

Against this backdrop, three separate anti-government alliances have sprung up and are jockeying for political mileage or even replacing the NUG. The first opposition group is of former President Hamid Karzai who, despite peacefully handing over the powers to Ashraf Ghani in 2014, remains politically active. Karzai sees himself as the saviour of modern Afghanistan and indispensable to the country's future survival and stability.

He has been a vocal critic of the NUG's different policies, especially Ghani's pivot to Pakistan. Ahead of the September deadline, Karzai has been holding hectic meetings with his political supporters, important tribal elders, and key political figures to manipulate the outcome of the Loya Jirga.

Many believe he hopes to return to power as the head of a transition national government by replacing the current setup if the decision of the Loya Jirga goes against the latter and a political deadlock ensues. Many cite this as another reason for the delay and government's reluctance to convene the Loya Jirga. The government is nervous and sceptical of Karzai's ambitions and his busy political schedule.

Urgent Need for Pragmatic Solution

The second group comprises Abdullah's supporters which include powerful warlords and key figures of the Northern Alliance group, such as commander Ismail Khan, the former governor of western Herat province, Atta Muhammad Noor, the governor of northern Balkh province and Amrullah Saleh, the former Afghan spy chief. As mentioned above, along with demanding political and financial concessions, this group has raised its own armed militias, parallel to Afghan security forces, to fight the Taliban and defend their areas showing a deep mistrust in the capabilities of the Afghan forces.

The third opposition group—Afghanistan Protection and Security Council—has been formed by the former Pashtun warlord Abdul Rasool Sayyaf. This group is more like an opportunistic pressure group rather than a real power contender. It is pressurising the government to fulfill its promises and honour its commitments regarding anti-corruption, reforming the election commission and holding the parliamentary elections. It hopes to extract political favours from President Ghani if the Ghani-Abdullah alliance breaks down and Ghani needs new political allies.

Afghanistan needs a fresh political agreement so that the current dispensation could complete its five-year term and focus on more pressing issues of security, economy, and governance. If a pragmatic solution is not found within the next two weeks, it will seriously undermine the legitimacy of the NUG. A political meltdown will be a huge setback for the common Afghans who defied all odds and risked their lives by coming out to vote in 2014 presidential elections and kept the democracy on track in Afghanistan.

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