



Policy Brief

Elections in Afghanistan Yalim Eralp

Abstract

Elections are being held in Afghanistan. The result will not change Afghan political landscape. As Obama said, the war was not one of choice but of necessity. Yet the Western project of building a unified Afghan nation and creating a modern state was a matter of choice. It has a very slim chance of succeeding. Today, it is better understood.

The continuation of the war carries an enormous financial burden and important political risks. Afghanistan may turn into a Vietnam preventing much awaited reforms by President Obama at home. It may erode the credibility of the North Atlantic Alliance and may destabilize Pakistan much more.

The West needs an exit strategy. Bringing into government "moderate Taliban", implementing projects aimed at people as Turks have done in the past and continuing the fight against terrorism not with large forces but with high-tech military means can be such a strategy.

Western statesmen care about the elections in Afghanistan. These elections are important, and there is a tendency to label them as "legitimate in the West" despite everything. An independent election committee, on the other hand, has already been void since there has been no security at the ballot boxes. There are also claims that there were extra ballots issued for women. Moreover, unlike male voters, ballots for female voters do not have photographs, which means women in burkas cannot be

identified. However, there is a more important matter at hand: Whether it is Karzai or Abdullah who wins, what is going to change? As a matter of fact, nothing... The main goal of the West is to give the old or the new leader legitimacy against the Taliban. Looking at the past, it is hard to say that the Afghan people are too sensitive about the "election legitimacy." That the elections are happening under the Taliban's shadow is obvious. Additionally, the troubling possibility is the post-election violence.

Following Al Qaeda's terror attacks on the US in 2001, no one objected to America's and the West's military action against Afghanistan; such a move was inevitable. However, with time the issue changed, and building a modern state in Afghanistan became one of its components.

Changing Afghan Geopolitics

In 2001 the US and the West weighed heavy in Afghanistan. In time, the geopolitical balance started to shift. Russia, which failed there in 1980 is now acting cautiously and keeping a low profile. Even the pro-US Karzai is willing to buy arms from Russia. Iran is weighing in through the Shia population in Afghanistan. While the West speaks of human and womens rights, the Afghan government's compromise to the Hazara was passing the law that permits the Afghan husband to deprive his wife of food or any financial means when she refuses to have sex with him. Shia students are the most important and consistent component in universities. Indeed, the Shias, who had been under a lot of pressure under Taliban, were initially happy with America's intervention and democracy. However, the Shias have by now joined those who want the US out of Afghanistan. For Iran, the importance of getting rid of the US precedes even getting rid of the Taliban...

China, with a full treasury and in need of raw

materials, is the new secret player in Afghanistan... It sees radical Islam as a threat, and at the same time has the second largest copper reserves in the world, which it recently acquired the right to manage. Pakistan has also always been an important part of the Afghan geopolitics. It is hard to apprehend what kind of an actor Pakistan is on the Afghan political scene. While the Pakistani leadership is fighting against the Taliban alongside the US, some Pakistani factions, including the Pakistani secret service, as well as a considerable portion of the public support the Taliban. When the sub-continent was partitioned, Pakistan defined its identity as a religion, and in time adapted its educational system to that. The results are clear... While India is the shining star, Pakistan's future is murky. The reality is that the Afghan people and politicians have always been angry with Pakistan when it tried to interfere in the country's domestic affairs. Thanks to religious influence, Saudi Arabia can also be effective in Afghanistan, despite not being a neighbor.

When we consider Afghanistan's neighbors, these are Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, China, Tajikistan and Iran. Iran, Pakistan and Tajikistan are the countries that have certain influence on Afghanistan. China, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan worry about radical Islam unlike the other two. However, their influence on Afghanistan is weaker.

It does not seem likely that a situation that might resolve the Afghan conflict will arise without Pakistan's sincere and serious support. Pakistan is facing conflicting pressures in this area both domestically and internationally, and its public seems divided. A more serious "Pakistan question" arises while we are trying to solve the Afghan problem.

The Reality of Afghanistan

As a matter of fact, Afghanistan is a state comprised of various tribes and war lords. The Afghani people unite against foreign powers, but wholly reject a strong centralized administration. The UK in the past and Russia in 1980s have learned the Afghan reality. Unfortunately, now the US and NATO are slowly comprehending this reality.

Afghanistan does not seem likely to become a modern and Western state. Where the tribal system, ignorance and poverty are the main elements, now terror is being fought.

Common interests and unity are hard to establish in Afghanistan where tribes and their leaders reign. The only point of unity is that these tribes should be left alone to do as they like. Such a state structure -if it can be called that- stagnates progress as well as allowing terrorist organizations like the Taliban and Al Qaeda to reign freely. Al Qaeda has adopted a

global character in time. By now it has become much harder, if not impossible, to eliminate terror even with large military forces.

Reconciliation with the Taliban

The British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs David Miliband was the first to suggest the necessity of talking to the "moderate" Taliban, if that exists. This view increasingly gained support. In fact it is understood that there are some developments in this area. One of these is happening through Saudi Arabia. Another one is happening through the Afghan government and officials. It is even said the Afghan government is working on a 7-step plan. Another name that came forward is Michael Sample, who is married to a Pakistani woman and is an ex UK and EU official. It is not clear what will come out of these meetings and contacts. However, it is understood there is no clear alternative at this stage. The goal is to include the moderate Taliban in the administration. It is further understood that there are ongoing meetings with the leader of Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin who had fought against the Soviets and served as president before the Taliban, Gulbuddin Hekmetyar. Hekmetyar's forces are fighting against Western and Afghan forces in northeastern Afghanistan. This conflicting portrait is actually reflective of Afghanistan. Journalist Metin Toker, when he got angry at the course of events in Turkey,

powers... At the basis of the rebellion is the Pashtun tribe, which has a leg in Pakistan..

The Vietnam Danger

President Obama said the war in Afghanistan is an unwanted but necessary one. (In other words, one the US was forced to fight). The republican academic Richard Haass who shares a similar opinion on this, says "Yes, but now it is a war we have chosen to fight." The casualties are increasing on the Western side, and especially the American public is withdrawing its support. Vietnam has been used as an example. The answer given to that "We had 500 thousand soldiers in Vietnam, and 68 thousand in Afghanistan" is not very convincing. Just like in Vietnam, the Afghan government is not modernized and extremely corrupt. The public's support for the West has decreased significantly. In Vietnam, North Vietnam supported the Vietcong. Here, Pakistani elements support the Taliban. The cost of the Afghan war has exceeded 200 billion dollars. Looking at Iraq, not only are the Iraqi people more educated in comparison to the Afghans, but the country is richer in terms of the infrastructure and natural resources. In short, if the disputes between political and ethnic groups are eliminated, Iraq will prosper. Afghanistan, unfortunately, does not hold the same chances...

Exit Strategy

All these developments point to the necessity to come up with an "exit strategy" for the West. Perhaps the search for a compromise with the Taliban is part of this strategy. The US and NATO are facing very difficult circumstances. It is now understood that it is extremely difficult to build a democratic, modern and united Afghan state. Afghanistan is also not a country that could be left to its own fate. Its geostrategic position is of utmost importance; it could upset the balance in Central Asia. What is called "state engineering" cannot be done there. While Turkey was liked and appreciated for years in Afghanistan, it never intended to alter the state's structure and implemented useful projects for the public. Indeed, in November 1962, a Turkish Foreign Affairs report carrying a serious analysis of this was given to the Americans, who were warned that the Soviets might invade Afghanistan in the future.

The West, while gradually replacing itself with local forces that it has trained, needs to implement projects that are geared more towards the people rather than the state. The terror component can of course not be ignored. Richard Haas proposes fighting terror with high technology intelligence and drones while avoiding large numbers of soldiers.

If Afghanistan turns into a swamp, Obama -

especially given the financial crisis- cannot pass the necessary reforms domestically and this will have certain global consequences. In other words, if NATO fails, it will mean a serious loss in credit. Turkey, which has historically built good relations with Afghanistan, might lose this sympathy with time. Pakistan, which is increasingly finding it difficult to deal with the Afghan problem within itself, will become an additional problem - and in fact it already has... Former American Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once said to late İhsan Sabri Çağlayangil that *"You might not be able to resolve every problem, but it is important to put the burden of the deadlock on the shoulders of your opponent."* The Afghan problem is highly reminiscent of this, but the party to take the burden is not clear. And now, while not a belligerent, Turkey too is preparing to send two battalions to Kabul and the region.

Ambassador (R)Yalım Eralp

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Global Political Trends Center (GPoT) was established as a research unit under the auspices of Istanbul Kultur University in 2008.

GPoT Center aims to produce innovative and distinctive policy recommendations by analyzing the contemporary trends in regional and international politics.

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