

Could Power-Sharing Build the Consensus Necessary for Peace in Afghanistan?

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Paper Summary

For there to be stability in Afghanistan, all major ethnic groups must be guaranteed a share of power. The support of the international community is needed now in order to make this a reality in the post-2014 era.

After more than ten years of the presence of international troops, the situation in Afghanistan is still volatile and the prospective for peace is highly uncertain. Aside from the volatility of the situation, the presence of international forces has not only prevented the Taliban from coming back to power but also significantly contributed to stability in both southern and central Asia. This is because the US-led intervention of Afghanistan in 2001 and subsequent collapse of the Taliban regime contributed to a situation in which Al-Qaida and other Pakistan-based terrorist groups have lost their potential to seriously destabilise the region. From a non-military prospective, the support of the international community has provided Afghanistan with the opportunity to experience a rapid reconstruction process in rebuilding permanent state institutions, improving the overall human rights situation, enjoying economic growth, developing civil society, and many more achievements. In fact, the tremendous achievements of Afghanistan in the last decade were unimaginable in the absence of international forces in that country.

However, since the international community has accelerated the transition process to transfer its security responsibilities to the Afghan security forces, the achievements of the last ten years face significant threats, due to serious political and security challenges. While many observers consider the Taliban-led insurgency as the main threat in the post-2014 era, there are many other equally important challenges – the dominance of warlords, widespread corruption, inter-ethnic tensions, lack of good governance and drug trafficking – that significantly threaten the achievements of the past decade. Of these challenges, increasing inter-ethnic tensions is an issue of central importance as it considerably undermines the whole process of the peace-building efforts of the last ten years. This is particularly so

given that Afghanistan has long been suffering from the harmful consequences of tensions and conflicts between its main ethnic groups: Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks.

To effectively deal with the challenge of instability in Afghanistan, it is important to seek a practical guarantee for all major ethnic groups to have a share of power in the political administration of the country. The practical guarantee would build the consensus necessary for achieving lasting peace by providing for all major ethnic groups to equally participate in the political, social, economic and legal processes. This goal would be achievable within a democratic power-sharing political system in which any decision-making efforts occur by consensus between all ethnic groups. In such a political system, all major ethnic groups in the country would be included (not excluded) in government in a way in which they would have the potential to influence both national and local policy-making and decision-making processes.

Despite the fact that the 2001 Bonn Agreement of the post-Taliban regime was a symbolic step towards a democratic power-sharing political system between major opposing groups, the dominance of the post-Bonn political administration by a particular group entirely failed the process. The post-Taliban political system in Afghanistan was overwhelmingly dominated by a group of Tajiks from Panjshir valley. Ironically, while the dominance of Panjshiri Tajiks over the political system ended by early 2006 under continuous pressure from the international community, the same scenario repeated once again and today the government of President Karzai is increasingly dominated by a group of Pashtuns. As such, the post-2001 political system of Afghanistan has been dominated by one or another ethnic group, fuelling the ethnic divide, and provoking inter-ethnic tensions and ethnic-based discrimination.

Critically examining the participation of major ethnic groups in national political processes in the post-2001 Afghanistan, it is extremely hard to draw a picture of a genuine democratic power-sharing political system. This is because since the UN-sponsored Bonn Conference of 2001 in which all conflicting parties (except the Taliban) participated in peace talks, no firm step has been taken to provide the ground for genuine representation of all major ethnic groups in national political and policy making processes. For example, at the Bonn Conference the people of Afghanistan were represented by a number of warlords who were accused of massive human rights violations throughout the civil conflicts of the 1980s and 1990s. As such, Afghanistan has not experienced a democratic power-sharing political system in the past decade; instead, the political system has been dominated by one or

another powerful ethnic group at the price of undermining the presence of other ethnicities in state institutions.

To build the consensus necessary for peace, it is important for the international community to pave the way for the establishment of a democratic power-sharing political system in Afghanistan. However, the establishment of a democratic power-sharing political system is not possible in the absence of a strong core of moderate political elites and effective civil society who seek pragmatic coexistence in the multi-ethnic society of Afghanistan. This means that no peace is achievable in Afghanistan if the political system of the country is dominated by a number of extremist politicians who believe in ethnic supremacy and ethnic-based discrimination.

The support of the international community in establishing a democratic power-sharing political system is an issue of central importance at this time, as the strong presence of the international community in the pre-2014 era would significantly facilitate such a process. The international community is currently able to use its leverage (political support, financial aid and military supplies) as a means of forcing the government of Afghanistan to genuinely support the idea of establishing a power-sharing political system. A democratic power-sharing political system would be a practical guarantee for the international community to ensure that the political, economic, cultural and legal achievements will be maintained in the post-2014 era. To achieve this, it is important for the international community to:

1. Work closely with a strong core of moderate political elites from the Afghan government who seek common values and pragmatic coexistence with other ethnic groups. Taking such a decision by the international community would not be an easy task, as President Karzai and probably many powerful members of his cabinet would oppose it. Such a system would automatically undermine the dominance of Karzai and his allies over the political administration of the country in the post-2014 period.
2. Seek potential political elites and public figures from the Afghan Parliament, political opposition groups, civil society, academic circles and student organisations to work with moderate politicians from the Afghan government in paving the way for the establishment of a power-sharing political system. It is extremely important for the international community to select those figures from the political elites who genuinely believe in democracy, human rights, social justice and coexistence between ethnic groups.

3. Take the necessary measures to amend the Afghan Constitution to legally guarantee the establishment of a democratic power-sharing political system in which there would be a share of power for all major ethnic groups in state institutions. To better guarantee a genuine share of power for each major ethnic group, it is important to amend the Constitution in a way in which no member of a single ethnic group would be able to simultaneously serve as head of more than one branch of the state (the government, the parliament, and the judiciary). Such a political system will ensure that in one time there would be three members from three different ethnic groups serving as head of the government, the speaker of the parliament, and the chief justice of the country.
4. Guarantee that there is a genuine share of representation for each single ethnic group in all state institutions, especially in the government. Such a practical guarantee would decrease the chance of any single ethnic group dominating all major posts in state institutions. However, such a guarantee will not be possible unless there is a reliable consensus on the percentage of the population of each ethnic group in Afghanistan. A reliable statistical consensus on the population of the country is very important in establishing a power-sharing political system because all major ethnic groups are eager to claim the number of their population is much larger than what exactly they constitute.
5. Use its political and economic leverage to force the Afghan government to take the necessary measures to decentralise power, with the intention of providing all ethnic groups with the opportunity to directly elect local authorities and decide about the priorities of socio-economic development in their areas. The decentralisation of power in Afghanistan is an integral element of the establishment of a democratic power-sharing political system as it provides local populations with the opportunity to have a share of power in the decision making processes of their areas.

A power-sharing political system would significantly undermine the legacy of the Taliban among Pashtuns: coexistence between all ethnic groups combined with the absence of the international troops in the post-2014 era will remove all justification to continue their violence. This is crucial because there is an increasing number of Pashtuns who support the Taliban in the mistaken assumption that the Taliban will serve them better than the current corrupt government of Afghanistan. Therefore, as a power-sharing political system would decrease inter-ethnic tensions and contribute to a more effective governance system, Pashtuns would see no reason for supporting the Taliban or any other armed groups.

Lastly, a power-sharing political system would automatically reduce the increasing influence of warlords among Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks, since with the lack of serious security threats from the Taliban there would be no support-base for these influential warlords among these ethnic groups. The ineffectiveness of the current government in delivering good governance and the growing dominance of state institutions by a group of Pashtuns associated with President Karzai have provided influential warlords with an opportunity to build support among their ethnic groups under the banner of protecting them against the dominance of Pashtuns. A power-sharing political system would prevent warlords who are accused of massive and indiscriminate violations of human rights over the last three decades from portraying themselves as the protectors of the people.

About the author

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