

**By Noshad Ali**

## **The “Un-united” National Unity Government**

### **Synopsis**

The Presidential elections of 2014 brought anything but political stability in Afghanistan. The National Unity Government, established after the U.S brokered deal, has failed to introduce political reforms, it promised to yield, and pushed the country into turmoil. The new government has not only further segregated the society but also contributed in mushrooming militancy, political chaos and economic downfall.

### **Commentary**

#### **Formation of National Unity Government (NUG)**

Afghanistan has always been in turmoil due to its failure of choosing a leader that may rule the whole country rather than one or more parts of the region. The same drift was observed in the Presidential elections of 2014 in the country, which again resulted in the nation divided into two groups acceding to two different leaders. Thus, the fate of Afghanistan, following the Presidential elections of 2014, was determined by another country rather than through the ballot box eliciting the consensus of its own people. The electoral issues, which halted the political process and led to a deadlock, were settled through the U.S brokered deal between the two leading political contenders, none of whom were satisfied with the contemporary electoral system of their country. Furthermore, the increasing insurgency in the country, confronted by the Afghan Government and the U.S security forces, which took responsibility of the region’s security and stability since 2001 and were scheduled to leave the country in December 2014, added to the challenge of holding a peaceful Presidential election.

The race for the Presidential office was narrowed down from 27 candidates to two influential political rivals amid the first phase of electoral contest. Former Finance

Minister of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani Ahmedzai won the run-off elections with a lead of some one million ballots against the former Minister of Foreign Affairs and the present leader of National Coalition of Afghanistan, Abdullah Abdullah. However, owing to the allegations of rigging and electoral frauds during the second round of polls, the anticipated governmental skeleton reached a stalemate when Abdullah Abdullah threatened to form a parallel government. The U.S administration mediated and offered a power-sharing arrangement to Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah to settle the dispute. The coalition structure devised through this plan was designated as National Unity Government (NUG). The NUG agreement was finally signed by Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah on 21st September 2014, after a thorough audit of all eight million votes under the supervision of U.S Secretary of State John Kerry. The power sharing deal made Ashraf Ghani the President of Afghanistan, as he had secured the most votes, while Abdullah Abdullah assumed the office of Chief Executive Officer (CEO). The constitution of the republic didn't offer the position of CEO as a part of the government; therefore, it had to be created by the president through presidential decree according to the NUG agreement.

The political agreement that underlies the structure of NUG is based on five main points: Calling of a Loya Jirga to amend the Constitution and define the position of an Executive Prime Minister (Government has to hold parliamentary and district council elections in order to be able to call a Loya Jirga as eighty-five percent of all constitutionally prescribed voting Loya Jirga delegates are, directly or indirectly, elected through the District Councils and Wolesi Jirga elections.); establishment of the quasi-prime-ministerial position of Chief Executive Officer (until the Loya Jirga was formed); all senior appointments to be made, on merit, through the consensus between the two organs of the government – the President and the CEO; the recognition of an opposition leader by presidential decree; and a shared commitment to electoral reforms, before the parliamentary elections, postponed at that time.

The agreement also contained an expiration date as the Loya Jirga was to be formed within two years following the agreement – the timeframe for which was supposed to expire in late September 2016. Nonetheless, the District Council elections, that were to take place for the first time, are nowhere to be realized in the near future. The process of registering voters with National Identity Cards, an essential step, before the

elections has not been carried out so far. The Wolesi Jirga elections were postponed with the Independent Election Commission in crisis as its chairperson resigned and most of its donors froze their funds. Likewise, the process of the electoral reforms have been very slow and handicapped; various committees, established to propose reforms in to the electoral system, proved futile until, this month, President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani received a final list of nominees to be elected as members of the election commission by a selection committee, formed only two months ago.

### **Political Unrest**

As time went by, without the NUG discharging its promises, there have been movements in many loosely organized opposition groups, for instance, the newly emerged party of a group of lawmakers and landlords known as the Afghanistan Protection and Stability Council. This is the first opposition party established since 2001, with the objective to pressurize the unity government to deliver its promises. Yet, its rising support indicates towards the gradual fusion of democratic process and acceptance of democracy, as a political system, in the country. Some of the opposition groups, to compound the political unrest, has also threatened to actively oppose the government following the expiration of NUG's mandate in September 2016. There have also been rumors that the President is looking at ways to get rid of the position that Abdullah Abdullah holds.

On the other hand, the posts for the ministries of defense, interior, and the chief of intelligence agency, being occupied by acting bodies, augmented the political instability as they have not so far been endorsed by the parliament. The political landscape of the country further jeopardized following a spate of resignations of government bodies and ministers of different departments, including last month's resignation of Daud Saba, minister of mines and petroleum. Some of the government officials took it to the social media in order to embarrass the government as well as to apprise the international community regarding incompetence of the government. For example, the former head of Afghanistan's spy agency, Rahmatullah Nabil, announced his resignation via a Facebook post. Earlier, an official in Helmand claimed on social media that the Taliban militants were poised to overrun parts of the

province. He further wrote that he could not contact the authorities when he tried to approach them.

### **NUG's Rifts and Insurgency**

The security situation in the country, like the aggravated political sphere, remained quite chaotic. The wavering political structure of the country has further pushed it to the verge of another gory civil war. The center is getting weaker day by day, whereas the insurgents and militants, enclosing the capital, are getting stronger. The provinces surrounding the capital city of Kabul are under constant spree of sporadic attacks staged by Taliban insurgents and other militants including ISK. The Taliban have become nothing but stronger after the announcement of the death of their Supreme leader Mullah Omar in 2015. During 2015, the deadliest year in past decade as designated by the UN, the presence of Taliban insurgents, along with other militant outfits, amplified in a number of Afghan provinces. The year not only brought thousands of civilian and military casualties but also spread the insurgents in almost entire of the country. The mounting infiltration of insurgent and terrorist elements, especially in provinces surrounding the capital, marked the incompetence of the NUG and, in turn, loosened its grip over the internal affairs. The power practiced by the military commander Abdul Rasheed Dostum, didn't reflect the power of the government; rather, it highlighted the limitations of central government and its influence over the populace.

### **Role of U.S, China, Russia, and India in strengthening NUG**

The U.S government has long been endeavoring to make the Afghan government self-sufficient, particularly on military grounds, to contain the mounting insurgency in the country. The US administration has been providing the military equipment, including light weight fighter aircrafts, and trainings to its soldiers in order to enable them to counter the terror maneuverings of the insurgent outfits operating in the country. China, on the other hand, is putting sanctions and bans on its Uighur communities, suspected of providing aid to the notorious Islamist militant outfit – Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The IMU predominantly inhabits the northern Badakhshan province, bordering Xinjiang province of China. Recently, China put a

ban on keeping fasts over the Uighur community; the unwarranted ban indicates that China is resorting to suppress the Islamist insurgents, finding refuge in the Uighur community. China is avoiding the flagrant engagement in the directionless, intractable, and seemingly never-ending war; nevertheless, it supports the Resolute Support Mission – a NATO-led mission launched, on 1 January 2015, to provide support and assistance to the Afghan security forces. Besides, India and Russia are also adopting different measures to support the Afghan security apparatus as Russia has gifted thousands of Ak-47 assault rifles while India has gifted a number of gunship helicopters to the Afghan military along with other military equipment.

### **Analysis**

Since the early ages of Achaemnid Empire to the great Chandragupta Maurya of Mauryan Empire, from Gondopharid dynasty to Sassanids towards the middle ages of Hindu Shahi and Islamic Conquest to Ghorids and Timurids, Afghanistan has not been ruled by a single king who could be deemed as “People’s Favorite”. From the short-lived rule of Hotaki Dynasty to the popular Durrani Empire, none could sustain their rule over a century, no-matter how much powerful and influential they had been. From the failed attempts of bringing democracy in the region by Zahir Shah to the military coup led by Hafizullah Amin of People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), nothing has brought any significant change in the governance system of Afghanistan or a sustainable change in the lives of its people. From the Marxist rule of Muhammad Najibullah Ahmedzai, backed by Russia, to the formation of “Islamic State of Afghanistan” by U.S backed Mujahideen in 1992, neither of the ideologies has ruled the battle-hardened people for long. From the Taliban’s establishment of the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” to the U.S invasion in 2001, Afghanistan has been anything but a nation of unified people that would unanimously accept an individual or group as their ruler.

When we look at Afghanistan, we see a country that has been torn by ethnic strife and devastated by internal conflicts. The state of Afghanistan, since its inception, has been a battle ground with no hopes of unity among its people who are divided into various groups by reason of different ethnic backgrounds. Pashtuns have always been the most dominant as well as underdeveloped ethnic group in Afghanistan, and hence, have always been taken as the most favorite tool of causing unrest in the region by

external entities who desired an unstable Afghanistan. During the 21st century, the country has outlived tens of wars and thousands of skirmishes resulting in millions of casualties, but is somehow, still inhibited by its own people. Might the country is cursed as stated by some historians, but its people seemed to be immune to the curses.

The arrangement that established two years coalition government, to unite the people of Afghanistan and to pave the way for a long-term solution to the country's problems, has expired in September 2016. However, during his recent visit to Afghanistan, the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, made it clear that the US is not in favor of the "two year term" of NUG. During the visit on 9 April 2016, he was asked about the future of NUG that whether the existing government would be revived in some way following the expiration of agreement in late September or would there be some negotiations to create a new one. While repudiating the previous commitments of the settlement, Mr. Kerry unexpectedly stated that the government of NUG was not going to end in September 2016; rather the agreement would stand for five years, a standard time period for a government constituted through the democratic process.

Despite the recent bitter remarks of CEO Abdullah Abdullah about the President Ashraf Ghani, labeling him "unfit to lead", both the parties seemed to endorse the idea of the US regarding the timeframe of so-called National Unity Government (NUG). Accordingly, CEO Abdullah Abdullah has set aside his political bickering with the President and has announced his support for Ashraf Ghani's five-year presidential tenure in a report, presented to the international donors in Brussels during the end of September 2016.

The newly born democratic government of Afghanistan, after losing its credibility, is now facing a contracting economy with 25 percent unemployment rate, an intensifying militancy and a deeply polarized internal political environment. The fragile political structure and staggering socio-economic dynamics of the country has pushed its nation to the verge of despair. Despite the failure of NUG to fulfill its commitments, the people of Afghanistan are less motivated to abolish the structure of the current government, owing to the fears of what replaces it might prove to be more unstable and dangerous. The nation is afraid of the unseen as it might result in more

deaths and chaos. Most of the Afghan community wants what the U.S and NUG desires, to bring reforms in the existing government and reshape its power-sharing structure to meet the people's demands. The government needs to strengthen its core by strengthening its economy through solidifying its access to international donors and develop a strong hold over its assets and their utilization. This step will not only assist stabilizing the government's financial standing but will also provide ample job opportunities and livelihood resources to the people, ultimately contributing to the minimization of anti-state perspectives. An economically strong government will help the country in countering militancy and will eventually strengthen the writ of the state over its peripheries. However, to achieve all these objectives, the President and CEO need to put aside their differences and work as a single entity inclined towards the prosperity of the country, rather than the group interests. The government needs to take the matter of Loya Jirga and Parliamentary elections earnestly if it wants to strengthen the democratic norms in the country. The government must engineer strong influence over its people to bring about sustainable political changes and devise a plan aimed at enduring unification of government and the people, against the anti-state elements, for ensuring the long term peace and prosperity in the country.

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