

Why Was A Political Settlement not Achieved in Afghanistan?

Shoaib Rahim

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Introduction

The Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan a.k.a. The Doha Deal was a calamitous attempt by the United States and the international community at political reconciliation in the country. As someone closely involved in the process from the republic side, I will attempt to share my observations in Doha and why I think we all failed.

I believe the combination of four major process-design factors contributed to the dysfunctionality and eventual failure of the negotiations between the Republic and the Taliban. First, a mischaracterization of the main drivers of the conflict, second the lack of agency on the Republic's side and many would argue even on the Taliban's side within the peace process. Third, the incorrect and unnecessary use of deadlines throughout the process and fourth, the assertion of leverage on the US and Republic side where none existed.

The Conflict

At its core, ethnicity and ideology were two major drivers of this protracted conflict that actually transcended the Taliban-Republic divide. These elements do overlap but we must assess them separately to appreciate the complexity they introduce. The first major contention to this day on the part of Afghanistan's non-Pashtun population is the demand for greater local autonomy from Kabul at the district and provincial levels. The debate on this matter remains mostly along ethnic lines, with an overwhelming majority of Pashtuns opposed to this notion while non-Pashtuns were in favor but offered distinct models for power-sharing and institutional design. Since the ethnically diverse republic negotiation team was divided on this issue, the negotiations with the Taliban failed to create the necessary space for this central issue of decentralization to be discussed.

The second source of conflict was ideological, a fundamental clash of values between progressives and traditionalists. The clash between the religious clergy and modernist reformers has been on-going for over a century in Afghanistan's history and it more or less transcends ethnic lines. One side believes in the implementation of restrictive social measures and a rigid interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence while the other leans towards secular governance and greater individual freedoms.

Any process that fails to recognize at the very least these two elements will not succeed. The interplay of these two elements in Doha was very interesting to watch. When forced to take a position on the matter, outside the official negotiation rooms, the Taliban would clearly be in favor of a strong central government in Kabul, which was the line that representatives of the palace also held within the republic team. This left out the other republic negotiators and many demonstrated this frustration in internal meetings. On the matter of ideology, the religious scholars on the republic negotiating team took similar positions to the Taliban, pushing the progressive members of the negotiation team together into one camp. A clear example of this was the very sensitive discussion on Hanafi and Jafari Jurisprudence in the constitution, where some of the younger negotiators took a progressive position and supported highlighting and strengthening protections/rights for the Jafari sect, while the republican religious scholars took a conservative position. The republican scholars were essentially forced to accept at the very least the position stated in the constitution so as not to 'delay' the talks any longer. Sweeping ideological matters under the rug for expediency did not achieve the intended results.

Agency

The U.S. decision to completely bypass Kabul and start talks with the Taliban may have been the largest and most potent contributor to the failure of the peace process. It sent a powerful signal to the domestic actors of this conflict that the republican side lacked agency: Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, the two leaders of the National Unity Government, did not have the ability to influence, let alone determine, the direction of a process that was existential to their survival.

In the eyes of the Afghan general public, the U.S. decision demonstrated the lack of faith of the United States in any and all of Afghanistan's political actors. The fact that the government of Afghanistan was, in no shape or form, consulted nor involved in the direct talks between the United States and the Taliban was a U.S. value judgment that changed the calculus of the war. The U.S. finalization of its deal with the Taliban on February 29th, 2020, was quickly, and in my opinion rightfully, interpreted as shifting sides; and it sparked a chain-reaction of hedging behavior among local armed non-state actors who were an important part of the war effort against the Taliban.

Oddly enough, the political opposition in Kabul saw this move merely as a vote of no confidence in Ashraf Ghani and quickly, and at first almost blindly, supported the peace process as a pressure tool to weaken and eventually dislodge him. This was most evident very early on in the process, in a boycott of the president's first Peace Consultative Loya Jirga held in early 2019. A large majority of the opposition including Abdullah Abdullah, Rashid Dostum, Mohammad Mohaqqiq, Karim Khalili, Salahuddin Rabbani and even Hanif Atmar refused to participate so as not to give Ghani full credit and center stage in this process. Most of the opposition actors rushed, instead, towards U.S. envoy Khalilzad to regain some of their lost relevance, having been sidelined by Ghani as his foes, an approach that ultimately weakened his own presidency beyond repair.

The other major effect of bypassing the government was the loss of the presidential palace as a partner to the process. Until the very end, Ghani was at best a reluctant and disgruntled negotiator and at worst a saboteur of the peace talks. Had the government of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani and through Abdullah Abdullah the other political actors, been consulted and involved in the US-Taliban talks and maintained a semblance of agency when facing the Taliban, the outcome of the process would probably have been fundamentally different from the catastrophe we are in today. This inclusion could have taken different shapes and forms, from a three-sided negotiation format to shuttle negotiations between Kabul and Doha, but, in any case, a model that demonstrated that the republic still mattered.

It is now clear that circumventing the government of Afghanistan in the Doha deal did far more harm than good to the peace process. The Doha deal which claimed to secure US interests by ensuring the safety of American troops during withdrawal, failed. The loss of thirteen US service members on August 26th 2021 at Abbey Gate due to a suicide attack on Kabul airport meant this agreement failed to secure American lives. The Taliban's commitment to prevent any threats against US and her allies from Afghanistan's soil is also an on-going conversation, has arguably little to do with the Doha deal and far more to do with the political mood of the day in Kabul. Their ties with Al-Qaeda are also arguably stronger than ever, evident in the US drone attack targeting Al-Zawahiri in the heart of Kabul.

On the flip side, the inability of the Taliban negotiating team to make a single decision without "consulting with their leadership" demonstrated their dependence on their regional backer, Pakistan. Private conversations with individual Taliban negotiators, some of which I was party to, were very different in tone and substance in comparison to the official engagements of the 'contact group' or the entire peace delegations. These individuals would occasionally demonstrate personal frustration with their lack of authority given that their families and entire livelihoods remained in Pakistan. My personal experience with this phenomenon demonstrated the strong grip that Pakistan had over any meaningful commitment made by the Taliban in Doha. The Taliban delegation lacked agency in Doha, which meant that, without genuine assurances from Pakistan's powerful army, those on the other side of the table could not assume compliance by the Taliban going forward. Whether or not the United States secured Pakistan's support for the US-Taliban agreement is beyond my scope of knowledge and information, but I can say with a high level of certainty that these negotiations had very few fans among our southern neighbors.

Deadlines

The element of time was also severely mishandled throughout the peace process, as deadlines and committed dates were based on an almost delusional sense of reality. The 'ending forever-wars' narrative dominated the discourse in Washington D.C. and grew to become oddly conflated with a full and complete troop withdrawal from Afghanistan when feasible alternatives existed.

The time and space needed for effective consensus-building around thematic issues within the republic as well as across the table with the Taliban were not provided, given the simplistic fear that Donald Trump could pull the plug any day. This fear was used to force various actors into rooms and conversations that required far more collective processing than was given credit. In comparison, it took three years of secret talks between the Colombian government and the FARC rebels before the sides were ready to go public, the total process taking over seven years.

Had the element of time been treated differently in this process, we would have seen a convergence of positions, on the republican side, among three loosely defined camps that were taking shape within Afghanistan. The first camp was heavily in favor of the status quo, meaning minimal to no change to the constitution. Ashraf Ghani and the palace were in this camp and already pushing for this line. The constitution was suddenly framed as a sacred document that no one could question or comment on, even though the palace itself was picking and choosing authorities from the constitution as it deemed fit. This camp was probably the most articulate and influential on the republican side and was represented accordingly in the negotiation team.

The second camp was in favor of a more decentralized state either through the introduction of the position of a Prime Minister or changes to produce a parliamentary party-based system. A majority of the political opposition was in this camp as indicated in many of the closed-door meetings and conversations that took place in Abdullah's Sapedar Palace. The difference of views among Junbishe Melli, Hezbe Wahdat, and various figures from Jamiate Islami were minimal and mostly tactical and essentially represented a more decentralized power structure. Many in the second camp saw the direct negotiations with the Taliban as an opportunity to correct some of the flaws and shortcomings of the Bonn process, the outcome of which was the ratification of the 2004 constitution that merged the powers of the king and the prime minister into the presidency and turned politics into a winner-takes-all system. With sufficient time and continued engagement, a consolidated and unified position would have strengthened the peace process as these factions would no longer have represented individual interests, or at least far less so, but rather a position representative of a broader polity. Instead, splintered, this camp continued to play their roles as spoilers to the palace.

The third, and least formed, camp was the large and silent majority primarily interested in the protection and expansion of the basic rights and liberties afforded to citizens in the constitution such as the right to education for all, freedom of speech and expression of culture through music and the arts, right to assembly and to have political representation, religious rights of minorities and more. The internal debate within this camp was ideological and rooted in the century-long struggle between progressive and regressive forces in Afghanistan. This struggle was, in my opinion, incorrectly framed through the lens of the urban-rural divide, even as a far more nuanced conversation was unfolding, influenced by cultural, ideological and even tribal and ethnic elements. Most importantly, this conversation required national introspection across various social strata over time.

Civil society actors, the media, academics, community elders, religious scholars, the business class and many youths fell in this camp. Unfortunately, they could not gain the needed momentum to influence the process and were almost exclusively represented by ad hoc tokenistic seats.

At its heart, this was (and remains) the most important conversation to be had between the people of Afghanistan and the Taliban: Where should we collectively draw the line when it comes to individual rights and freedoms and the self-proclaimed divine order and how do we move forward together while acknowledging yet constantly discussing our differences? Conversations of this nature did occasionally take place within the republic's negotiating team but few paid attention to them and even fewer raised them with the Taliban. The Taliban mostly avoided these conversations as they were the most sensitive in their eyes. For example, the most heated exchanges among the negotiating teams took place when the Taliban refused to mention the Jafari Shia Jurisprudence in the code of conduct document.

Any lasting political settlement would be predicated on resolving such deeply contentious and contradictory values. Without addressing the root causes of these differences, we should not expect any political arrangement to last very long. Since this third camp failed to become relevant, this meant that the negotiation team predominantly represented the palace and traditional political actors through their children or close confidantes with little to no accountability to the general population or even, I would argue, their own limited constituencies.

Leverage

A genuine opportunity for achieving a political settlement would have been available if the US-Taliban agreement kept the only leverage the US had over the Taliban, which was its troop presence, as minimal as it was, and air support to the ANDSF. An unconditional commitment to a withdrawal timeline as well as the cessation of all air support to the ANDSF meant two things for the Taliban.

First, they could cosmetically adhere to the articles of the Doha deal and any violations would not have serious consequences. This meant sitting in a room with the republic negotiators but not actually discussing anything related to political settlement or ceasefire, which were the two priorities of the republic side. This is mostly what happened across eleven months the few times the two sides actually met. Similarly, the majority of the 5000 Taliban prisoners released by the republic (under U.S. pressure) returned to the front lines of the battlefield despite Taliban commitments to the contrary.

Secondly, the Taliban's posture on the battlefield was boosted, and they aggressively ramped up the war effort against an ANDSF that no longer had US air support and was also forced into an 'active defense' posture (i.e. U.S. forces would not support any operations to take the war to Taliban territory).

President Ghani misused what little leverage the republic maintained – including the right to refuse participation in talks and the decision to release prisoners –making deals for himself instead. He rejected Doha as the location for the negotiations but caved after his team's composition was accepted by DC. He initially resisted the release of the 5000 Taliban prisoners, and in my opinion rightfully so, but signed the release order the day after Khalilzad attended his presidential inauguration in a highly disputed election. Meanwhile, the Taliban accrued leverage by constantly threatening to walk away from the talks while the Americans, save for a minor pause due to a tweet by Donald Trump, and the republic stayed the course no matter what.

Conclusion

In the end, given the failure to achieve a political settlement, we must be open to questioning the most basic assumptions about the conflict in Afghanistan and consider reaching new, different conclusions.