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Afghanistan: failure of US-Taliban peace talks looms over elections

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Supporters of incumbent Ashraf Ghani at a rally in Kabul ahead of elections on September 28. Ghulamullah Habibi/EPA

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While Kabul was asleep early on the morning of September 8, Donald Trump abruptly cancelled peace negotiations with the Taliban. In a statement 17 hours later, the insurgent group said that the US would “lose the most”. But for Ashraf Ghani, the Afghan president bidding for a second term in office at elections on September 28, it was a massive relief. For his sidelined administration, a peace deal with the Taliban would mean losing everything.

A peace agreement between the US and the Taliban, which had been “agreed in principle” was due to be signed in Doha. But the US president called it off, also cancelling a planned visit by Taliban leaders to Camp David. He tweeted that no deal would be achieved unless a ceasefire was reached first. This poured cold water over the heads of those Taliban who had already started beating the drum of victory.

In Afghanistan, Trump’s decision was cheered by opponents of the potential peace deal but raised concerns among many other Afghans who hoped the days of war were numbered, regardless of how imperfect the peace deal would be.

Donald J. Trump



@realDonaldTrump

Unbeknownst to almost everyone, the major Taliban leaders and, separately, the President of Afghanistan, were going to secretly meet with me at Camp David on Sunday. They were coming to the United States tonight. Unfortunately, in order to build false leverage, they admitted to..

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What made the recent negotiations significantly different from previous peace efforts was the US government's willingness to negotiate with an insurgent group that has claimed responsibility for the deaths of at least **2,300 American soldiers**. The Taliban's longstanding condition for any peace talks has been to negotiate directly with the US, which played a significant role in toppling their regime in 2001.

Growing suspicion

After the initial rounds of the US-Taliban peace started in December 2018, the Ghani administration began to become suspicious about its role in the negotiations. As the peace talks approached their endpoint, the administration faced mounting insecurity, realising that the US, its patron, was giving it a cold shoulder. The main reason the US sidelined the Kabul administration appeared to be the Taliban's strong opposition to the government, which the group labels both a "puppet" and "illegitimate".

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The Taliban's rigid stance against the Afghan government added to the intricacy of the job of US peace envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad. He was left with two choices: either support the current political status quo – the National Unity Government and the upcoming presidential election – or take a risky path with the Taliban on board which could potentially lead to a new political settlement.

Ghani was left pushing for the presidential election, in which he believed he had an upper hand. But the US, which had brokered the formation of the unity government in the aftermath of a contested presidential run-off in 2014, clearly had a different priority: the peace process. Its reasoning is that without peace and stability, Afghanistan cannot embrace growth and economy development.

While the US never took a public stance against the election, it was reported that Khalilzad, in private meetings with Afghan elites, had implicitly hinted that the vote could be cancelled and an interim government would be formed. At this point many Afghans started believing that the elections would not happen – including the vast majority of the presidential candidates.

However for Ghani's team, given that the administration was being sidelined in the peace talks, holding election was a matter of life or death. To reconcile peace with elections on his own terms, in November 2018, Ghani presented a new set of peace proposals with a five-year implementation period – equal to a five-year presidential term that he hopes will be his own. The move was criticised and discredited by other presidential hopefuls.

But Ghani is not the sole leader of the Afghan government. Abdullah Abdullah, his main electoral opponent on September 28, is Afghanistan's current chief executive who claims nearly 50% of the government based on the National Unity Government deal. During Khalilzad's July trip to Kabul, Ghani was initially reluctant to sign an agreement related to the US-Taliban peace deal, but then the US envoy approached Abdullah for it. All of a sudden, Ghani changed his mind.



Abdullah Abdullah on the campaign trail in Herat. Jalil Rezayee/EPA

Fate of elections

In August, with the US-Taliban peace talks on the verge of conclusion and elections just a month away, an average of 74 people were killed every day in the country, according to the BBC. One-fifth of these were civilians, including children.

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One of the reasons why Trump pulled out of the agreement was a Taliban attack in Kabul on September 6 in which a US soldier and 11 others were killed. But the Taliban had never agreed to end its violent campaign against foreign forces until a peace deal was signed. The withdrawal of foreign

troops from Afghanistan and a verifiable Taliban guarantee to fight terrorism were the main topics of the “dead” peace talks.

It’s still possible that the talks with the Taliban will resume, with Trump pushing for a “better” deal ahead of the US presidential election in 2020. Both the Taliban and Pakistan have been urging the US to resume the peace negotiations.

For his part, Abdullah has taken the US’s side by prioritising peace. He has said over and over that if he wins the election and the next day, the Taliban shows genuine willingness for peace, he would step down – in stark contrast to Ghani.



Biometric devices being checked in Kabul before elections on September 28. Hedayatullah Amid/EPA

With polling day approaching, a group of Kabul elites, including the former president Hamid Karzai, still think the presidential election threatens peace. They feel disenfranchised from the state resources and privileges and see a negotiated political settlement as an opportunity to renegotiate the distribution of power and resources.

For its part, the Taliban labelled the upcoming elections a “sham”. The poll has high stakes and may be fairly destabilising, given the likelihood of threats of violence, accusations of fraud and breakdown of the political order. It will be very difficult for Afghanistan to have a transparent, free and fair election – at least in the current climate. Still, without elections it’s hard to secure a sustainable peace and stability.

The halted peace talks and upcoming election have one critical point in common: they both operate with a “winner-takes-all” political logic. To ensure a sustainable peace and stability in Afghanistan, it is of paramount importance to design an inclusive set-up in which the distribution of power and resources align with the realities of the country’s power structures.

Otherwise, the costs of excluding key groups with the capacity for violence, including the Taliban, will prolong even further a war that has taken a huge death toll.

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