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# Taliban Toxin

Elections are divisive, pitting parties against each other in the pursuit of power. In Afghanistan the presidential poll could increase conflict too, with the Taliban exploiting easy targets and the risk of fraud high and rising. If things do go wrong, the shockwaves could cross the border into Pakistan where the Taliban toxin has been spreading.

**a**FGHANISTAN IS ABOUT TO move into one of the most difficult and potentially-explosive phases of its post-2001 political development. The presidential election, scheduled for August, has brought to the surface quite profound tensions in its political elite. Managing these will be no small task. Yet doing so is vital for the Afghan people, since voting offers one of their few opportunities to change their own political environment.

The electoral process, which draws large numbers of vulnerable citizens into public places at predictable times, risks creating targets for the Taliban. Insurgents may ruthlessly strike to maintain the momentum of their drive against the Afghan transition and its key

supporters, most importantly the United States.

It is imperative that the wider world prepares forces to deal with such contingencies, and signals to the Taliban's backers in Pakistan that the political costs for them of Taliban attacks on voters would be very high.

## VULNERABLE

US President Barack Obama's administration has moved swiftly to restore Afghanistan to a prominent position in Washington's foreign policy priorities and to develop a new strategy to address its problems. In the midst of a global financial meltdown and major economic challenges, this is no small achievement.

But will there be sufficient security for voting, and what might happen if there is not? The Obama administration and its European allies are committing thousands of fresh troops, but elections are highly vulnerable to attack.

Southern and eastern Afghanistan are wracked by a vicious insurgency emanating from sanctuaries in Pakistan to which the Taliban leadership fled in 2001 after Operation Enduring Freedom overthrew their regime. It is in these very parts of the country that one finds many of the Pashtuns who formed the core of President Hamid Karzai's support in 2004.

The disenfranchising of these voters on 'security' grounds would sit ill with the democratic thrust of Afghanistan's 2004 constitution. This is why Karzai initially went along with the proposal of the Independent Electoral Commission to defer voting until August 20 so that security could be enhanced.

Recognising the importance of an integrated approach to a problem as complex as Afghanistan, Obama has re-focused attention on two interconnected dimensions: enhanced civil-military interaction, reflected in the choice of retired Lieutenant-General Karl Eikenberry as the new US Ambassador to Afghanistan; and the wider regional relations of southwest Asia, demonstrated in the appointment of Richard Holbrooke as Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

However, such international attention does not automatically deal with the pressures that can arise from a country's own political processes.

The imminent election looms like a cloud over Afghanistan's transition; and elections are intrinsically divisive exercises that create winners and losers.

Until very recently, this received little attention in western countries, but the impact of the electoral process in Afghanistan is already being powerfully felt, with different actors



jockeying for position. Karzai was elected for a five-year term in 2004 expiring on May 22. The challenges which this poses for both the Afghan constitutional system and Afghanistan's international backers are enormous.

The constitution provides for a strong executive presidency. The president is chosen in a process based on the French model. If no candidate wins an absolute majority, a run-off is held two weeks later between the two contenders who performed best. The struggle for the number two position in the first round could be just as intense as the competition for the top spot.

In 2004, Karzai led his nearest challenger by almost forty percentage points, and avoided a run-off with apparent ease. The key word, however, is 'apparent'. Karzai's 2004 vote of 55.4 percent was not that far above the fifty percent threshold at which a run-off would have been triggered, and there is every reason to expect one now. International support in the form of material resources and special security measures will be required for both rounds.

## STRUGGLE FOR POWER

The political environment has changed markedly over the last five years. While Karzai is not an ethnic chauvinist, it is notable that



most of the key positions in his government – including the vital defence and interior ministries – are now controlled by members of the same ethnic group. This has boosted tension in the political elite.

But a more serious problem is the decline in mass confidence that the country is heading in the right direction. This has made the election much less an exercise in theatrics and much more a real struggle for power than was the case last time, when most other actors recognised that Karzai was likely to win.

The postponement until August 20 was

depicted by at least some of Karzai's critics as a power grab; and further moves to put off the election for any but the most compelling reasons of insecurity would likely precipitate an immediate constitutional and political crisis.

Yet ironically, Karzai's subsequent decree simply calling on the Independent Election Commission to conduct elections according to the Constitution also provoked complaints – an indication that his critics are far from prepared for campaigning.

## ROUGH SUMMER

The focus of his opponents therefore shifted to a demand for some kind of caretaker arrangements between May and August, and between a first and second round of voting. However, depending on the level of possible cooperation between his opponents, these arrangements may not materialise, in which case Afghanistan's international backers should prepare for a rough summer. If the election is contaminated by fraud, the latter part of the year could prove rougher still.

If there is an acute sharpening of leadership tension, the Taliban and other radical forces based in Pakistan may seize the opportunity to strike heavy blows even before new US and

international troops are fully deployed. They may also try to attack the international presence, to test or sway public opinion.

All this implies that the problem of sanctuaries in Pakistan also requires immediate attention. The failure to address this is the toxin that has poisoned Afghanistan's transition, and stands as a harsh reminder of the perils of wishful thinking.

Serious tension exists between Pakistan's assertion of all the rights of a sovereign state and its failure to discharge one of the key duties: to prevent its territory being used to mount attacks on a friendly neighbour. The wider world is undoubtedly justified in pressing Pakistan over this issue.

## LOCK-UP THE MILITANTS

The arrest of the Afghan Taliban leaders on Pakistani soil would be a very positive sign that Islamabad was beginning to take its global responsibilities seriously, and is well within the capacity of the authorities. Indeed, if Pakistan is to be saved, this is an essential first step; it cannot be protected from the spread of militancy if it continues to nurture militants as a matter of policy.

However, Pakistan is increasingly beleaguered on a number of fronts, and requires civil and economic support to confront the longer-term dangers – even though it is largely the architect of its own misfortune – with successive governments having naively believed that they could use religious extremists as instruments against India without such forces spinning out of control.

Obviously, the problems of Pakistan and Afghanistan are entangled in a complex set of interlocking security dilemmas. Importantly, they involve also Iran, India and China. These dilemmas cannot easily be addressed, given underdeveloped regional cooperation.

The path for the Obama administration is not the simplistic one of pressing India to make concessions to Pakistan over Kashmir, but the more subtle approach of incentives for regional states to cooperate in particular spheres, in the hope of slowly breaking down barriers that separate them.

It is here that long-term considerations are important, and it is for a long-term commitment that the American and international public have to be prepared – even in times of economic hardship. The Suez crisis marked the end of Britain as a global power, losing Afghanistan and Pakistan could be America's 'East of Suez' drama.

