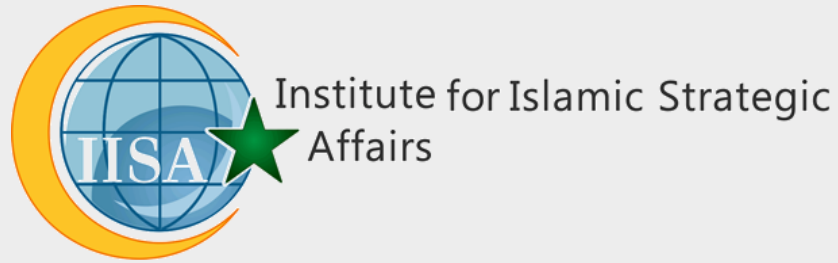
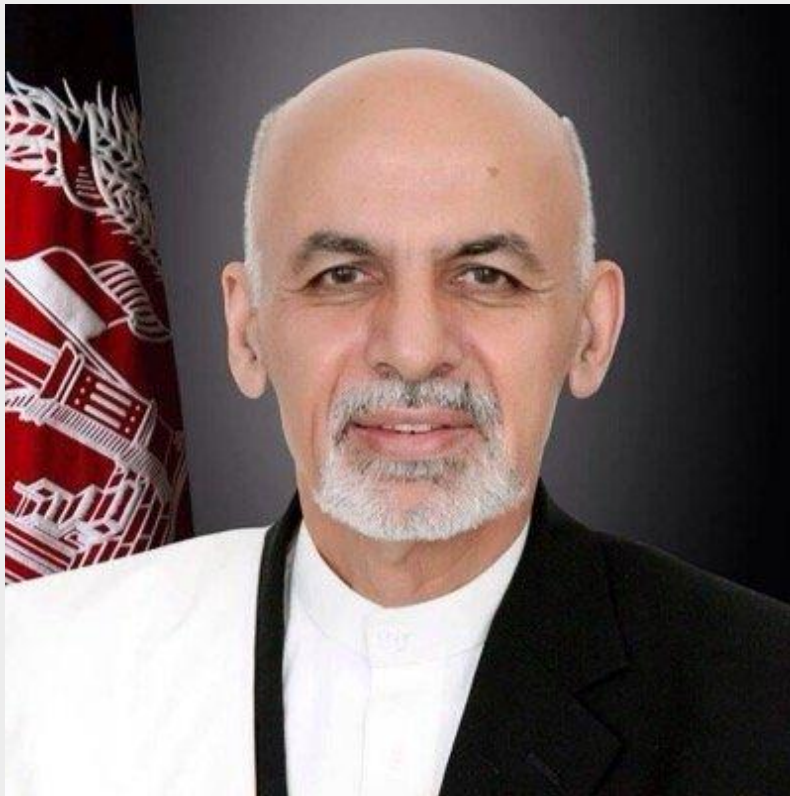


IISA's Blog Post



By 'Tariq Basharat' in London



ASHRAF GHANI: THE CHALLENGES AHEAD?

[IISA's resident researcher 'Tariq Basharat' provides analysis on the challenges ahead for the newly elected Afghan President.]

Ashraf Ghani: The challenges ahead

Ashraf Ghani comes to power on a wave of optimism. A recent survey showed that 84% of the country was happy with his performance so far. Afghans are hoping his expertise in economics and post-conflict reconstruction can revive a nation war-torn by 36 years of conflict. However, the outcome of political and strategic developments does not wholly depend upon the strength and character of an individual, there is always a multifarious set of challenges which the incumbent leader faces. Nowhere is this truer than Afghanistan; Ashraf Ghani has the task of addressing issues such as widespread corruption, rising sectarian tension, rebuilding the relationship with its Western patrons, an insurgency which threatens the power of Kabul and powerful neighbours, all within a country which lacks the proper financial, political and social infrastructure needed to tackle these problems in the first place. It is a Herculean task, no doubt.

First and foremost, Afghans should be under no illusion: even though the USA has significantly reduced its mission in the country, Afghanistan is still considerably dependent upon its

American (and NATO) benefactors. President Ghani inherits this relationship in the worst shape it has been since the US led NATO invasion in 2001. This is almost completely due to Hamid Karzai, President Ghani's predecessor who refused to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement, which would allow the presence of American troops in Afghanistan for the next decade, and became increasingly critical of the American presence in Afghanistan. From the American point of view, they did not appreciate hearing such sentiments from a country in which they spent more money than the entire Marshall Plan, which rebuilt post-WWII Western Europe, combined. So Ashraf Ghani has the undesirable task of rebuilding ties with his patron.

President Ghani's high stature within the West, mainly due to his academic background, will give him an advantage over his predecessor and rivals. Even more important is his knowledge of the West, the place where his intellectual development blossomed and allowed him to become a world renowned academic. Such experience will prove

vital when it comes to dealing or lobbying with the West.

It is essential for Ghani to make the West want to be in Afghanistan; a tall task considering the amount of money spent and lack of progress to show for it. He needs to be cost-efficient with aid but more so he needs to utilise all of his expertise on the subject of in-conflict and post-conflict reconstruction and demonstrate that the money, time and effort put in over the past 13 years by the West has not gone in vain. The recent upheaval in Iraq and Syria caused by Islamic State will work in Ghani's favour as it will force the Americans to think about its commitment to the region; seeing as the conditions are already conducive to a similar scenario with the existence of a Neo-Jihadist movement in the Tehrik-e-Taliban.

Another problem which should occupy the mind of Afghanistan's President is good governance. This may come across as generic but that's because the problem within Afghan politics is so great. Corruption is something he cannot avoid, he must address it. The 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index reveals

Afghanistan to be the most corrupt country on the planet joint with Somalia and North Korea; those are unenviable company. Widespread corruption at the highest level has become a feature of the fabric of Afghan politics. This means Ghani will have to step on the toes of prominent figures. For example, the Kabul Bank fraud case was alleged to have involved the brother of then President, Hamid Karzai. Such actions might undermine his attempt of forming a Unity government which is actually united, as his aggressiveness in an issue which impacts all levels of Afghan politics could alienate some. It is undoubtedly a delicate issue.

What's arguably an even more sensitive issue is the balance of power within Kabul. Ever since the toppling of the Taliban regime in 2001, the members of the Northern Alliance, or *Shuria Nizar*, have risen to positions of prominence and are undeniably the most powerful group within Kabul. His opponent in the election, Dr. Abdullah, is a leading member of the group; indeed, it can be argued that it was only due to the power and political influence exerted by the *Shuria Nizar* that allowed Abdullah to

have a settlement in which he was still given powers despite having clearly been defeated in the general elections by Ashraf Ghani. The governor of Balkh, another leading member of the Shuria Nizar, Atta Nur Mohammad has openly stated prior to the election results that he would not accept Ashraf Ghani if he won. It is important for President Ghani to know and be firm with his approach to members of the Shuria Nizar. Will he appease them like his predecessor Karzai or will he challenge any affronts to his presidential prerogatives?

What makes the Shuria Nizar issue even more complicated is that it is centred along sectarian lines; therefore it is prone to sectarian tension. Whilst the Pashtuns are the sizeable majority in the country, there is a significant Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara population within Afghanistan. Ever since the Afghan Civil War in 1992, Afghanistan has slowly moved towards sectarianism. Again, Ghani has the immense task of stopping and reversing this trend by forming a government which gives sufficient representation to all the peoples of Afghanistan.

Perhaps the most important existential problem President Ghani must deal with is the Taliban. After 13 years of American forces' presence, the Taliban are still fully functional and a threat to the Afghan government. The Taliban operate throughout the country, but are most successful in their stronghold in the south of the country where the Pashtuns, which make up the majority of the Taliban, mostly dwell. Ashraf Ghani will likely use his Pashtun ethnicity to his advantage when it comes to dealing with the Taliban. We know he is popular among the Pashtuns from the fact that during the elections, his opposition tried to use the fact that Ghani's wife is foreign and non-Muslim against him but his respect amongst the Pashtuns and Afghans meant that it did not have an overall impact on his election campaign. More importantly, due to his reputation as a famed intellectual and his unique track record of being incorruptible, he will be difficult to be labelled a puppet by the Taliban or other groups. This is significant. He also studied at an Islamic Madrasa for a year; this will go a long way to legitimising him in the eyes of the Taliban. In regards to the relationship between the Taliban and Pakistan –

which is widely believed to be the patrons of the movement, President Ghani comes to office at an auspicious time as their relationship is at an all time low. However his recent trip to Pakistan is a positive step forward. An imminent challenge for Ashraf Ghani will be to renew negotiation efforts.

especially with the low quality of poor infrastructure that Afghanistan possesses. But Afghans feel optimistic and the fragile coalition with Abdullah Abdullah holds. It remains to be seen if this will be just another tragic chapter in Afghanistan's recent history or if the country will finally be allowed to heal from its countless wounds.

These are all colossal tasks to address

About Us

IISA is a think-tank and an intellectual forum for addressing the current and future dynamics of the Islamic-world and its interaction with Western civilisation. Based in London, IISA will create trans-Islamic and global reach. IISA seeks to establish a platform where Islamic-world's dynamics, trends, issue, problems or crises are analysed within the Islamic-world and by working on local models and realities and not against any external standards or perceptions. We will be one of the leading think-tank on the Islamic-world and its role in the contemporary global system. In a short span of time we have attracted great academic support and a reputation for both open and track-II dialogues. IISA is the only think tank initiative that goes beyond national and regional inclinations and addresses strategic and socio-political issues/crises of the Islamic-world in its totality. For more information i.e. our mission statement, current programmes and our academic and regional expertise please visit the following links:

- **Website:** www.iisa.org.uk
- **Blog:** <http://iisablog.org/>
- **Twitter:** https://twitter.com/IISA_org
- **Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/pages/IISA-Institute-of-Islamic-Strategic-Socio-Political-Affairs/118608928247992?ref=hl>

