



ANTONIO GIUSTOZZI
E-mail: antonio.giustozzi@googlemail.com

CASEY GARRET JOHNSON
E-mail: cjohnson@usip.org

Electoral Offensive Taliban Planning for Afghanistan's 2014 National Elections

Summary

- The Taliban have more resources and are better organized to disrupt Afghanistan's 2014 national elections than was the case in any of the country's last four elections. Still, there are disagreements between insurgent leaders about carrying out a campaign of violence and intimidation.
- One group, led by Akhtar Mansur and tied to the Quetta Shura, favored, at least for some time, a more conciliatory approach and in the spring met informally with Afghan government officials to discuss allowing the polls to go forward. Another group, led by Taliban military commander Zakir and the Peshawar Shura, favors disrupting the election.
- These upper-level divisions may have little consequence on the ground since rank-and-file fighters are either vowing to carry out attacks regardless or, as has happened in the past, may strike local deals with political entities to look the other way and allow voting to take place.

“What is beyond doubt is that the Taliban have the means, more than in any previous election, to become a significant actor in the electoral process.”

A Capacity To Disrupt

With Afghan presidential and provincial council elections less than six months away, a major concern is whether the Taliban will allow them to proceed. One school of thought is that they will seek to disrupt elections to deny the next government as much legitimacy as possible. Another school of thought is that they will seek to influence their outcome in a way that is favorable to their long-term political objectives, which are to overthrow the current regime. What is beyond doubt is that the Taliban have the means, more than in any previous election, to become a significant actor in the electoral process.

The prospect of disruption is particularly worrying because Taliban influence is greatest in the Pashtun south and east. The suppression of turnout in Pashtun areas could lead to an indefinite suspension of the polls or an outcome seen as illegitimate by those unable to vote, turning the election into a tool of ethnic rivalry rather than an exercise of national unity. A more pragmatic attitude could inject energy into the political negotiation process. This brief, based on more than 50 interviews with Taliban foot soldiers, subcommanders and leaders from March to May 2013 and carried out under the direction of Antonio Giustozzi, attempts to shed light on current deliberations within the Taliban movement on this crucial question.¹ The U.S. Institute of Peace will publish a longer paper based on this research and authored by Giustozzi.

Propaganda And Pragmatism

The Taliban, on principle, has opposed all four previous national elections. Their ability to do so, however, has varied throughout the years. In 2004, while the movement was reconstituting itself, they adopted a wait-and-see attitude about Afghanistan's first election. Persuasion, propaganda and intimidation, rather than direct violence, were their main means of undermining the process. By 2009 and 2010, the Taliban had grown far stronger and were able to openly attack polling sites, candidates, voters and election officials. Yet in some areas with a heavy insurgent presence—northern Helmand and central Zabul provinces, for instance—local commanders made informal agreements with candidates and powerbrokers to allow voting to take place. These deals tended to be ad hoc, local and self-interested, and the Taliban movement never rhetorically veered from its anti-election stance.

More noteworthy is that the elections began to expose divisions within the movement. In 2009 and 2010, the Peshawar Shura was mostly in favor of allowing the elections to go forward, according to a current member. Quetta, by contrast, was steadfast in its desire to disrupt the elections. Peshawar's stance was less a matter of tolerance or political flexibility than a realization that their ability to conduct disruption operations outside of Kunar and Nuristan was, at that time, rather weak.

Today the situation is different: The Peshawar Shura is more organized and unified in its anti-election stance and has been given more funds and responsibility to disrupt the 2014 election than Quetta.

Peshawar Out Front

The Peshawar Shura has been setting the agenda for the Taliban's 2014 election disruption strategy. According to one member, an "Electoral Office" was established in February 2013 and was allocated \$5 million to create a network of "Electoral Commissions."²

Taliban "election commissioners" said their instructions involved convincing elders not to participate in elections and to burn their voter identification cards. A Taliban logistician in Ghazni said he was ordered to stockpile weapons and ammunition, with an eye to a Taliban offensive. In spring 2013, Taliban commanders from the provinces were recalled to Pakistan to be briefed about the elections plan and were told to spend all their energy in the week before the election "until we had 100 percent prevented the elections in our districts and provinces."³

Some sources said that Peshawar had threatened to cut funding or even attack any Taliban supporting the election process. By June 2013, provincial commanders who talked to Kabul politicians in Wardak and Ghazni about facilitating elections in their areas of control had reportedly been sacked and detained.

But what the Taliban publicly say they are planning to do and what they are actually doing does not always align. The procedure adopted for buying and registering voters' cards is revealing. Taliban election commissioners in the districts had a budget to buy voters' cards from elders, usually costing about \$10 each. The cards were counted and copies sent to Peshawar by the Taliban but then returned to the elders who were told to wait for orders.

Interestingly, the cards were not destroyed but rather left in the hands of the elders. This suggests that the Taliban were keeping open the option of influencing the elections rather than simply disrupting them. Similarly, separate sources reported that during the September–October candidate nomination period Taliban were selling the photocopied cards to potential candidates.⁴ It is unclear whether in this case the Taliban were simply raising revenue off of the elections process or if they were trying to shape the field of candidates.

A Taliban source in Khost said in late 2012 that Peshawar Shura members were debating whether to support a presidential candidate in 2014. That means hard-line opposition to the elections has not been the only option discussed.

Quetta's Hard-liners

Though Peshawar has so far taken the lead in planning to disrupt the elections, the most anti-election faction within the Taliban is under the control of Abdul Qayum Zakir in Quetta. Zakir and his alliance of commanders represent the hard-line and ascendant faction within a divided Quetta Shura. It is in part because of this division that Zakir has allowed Peshawar take the lead in planning disruptive activities and funders have allocated the majority of funding for them to Peshawar. Peshawar has been allowed to open its "Electoral Commissions" even in areas under Quetta control, including the north and parts of Zabul and Ghazni provinces.

Zakir and Peshawar's position as of spring 2013 was that both peace negotiations and elections were impossible as long as "foreigners" were in Afghanistan. Successful elections, in particular, would be seen as America's victory.

Zakir's commanders and rank and file were the most eager of all factions within the Taliban to respond to the elections with violence. In a typical sentiment, a Zakir fighter from Ghazni stated: "There are some Taliban who think elections are happening anyway so we must talk with the government and get some money, but we say, 'No, this is not true.' The Taliban must not support the elections."⁵

The Other Side Of Quetta

In other areas under Quetta's control, such as Kandahar, Helmand and Farah, electoral disruption efforts will be left to selected Taliban commanders and networks. This plan seems intended to allow the Akhtar Mansur alliance, the other main faction within the Quetta Shura, to stay out of the anti-election campaign. His negotiating efforts with Kabul and third parties could continue while allowing for substantial violence and sabotage in the south.⁶

A Quetta Shura member reported that representatives of Mansur met Afghan President Hamid Karzai in Qatar in March to discuss the elections, peace talks and issues of national unity. According to this individual, Karzai said he needed the support of Mansur's alliance to hold elections in Pashtun areas.

The conditions presented to Karzai in return for the alliance not moving to derail elections reportedly included the release of Taliban prisoners, a number of ministerial posts and ambassadorships, changes in the constitution and the departure of foreign forces from Afghanistan. Mansur's group was ready to support a presidential candidate as long as he was "a Muslim" and did not have any relationship with western forces.

The fact that Mansur had not issued clear guidelines on the election by April 2013 was confusing to his subcommanders. One cadre said that he was still waiting for orders from Mansur and that there were no real differences between different fronts concerning the elections. He felt that only if Mansur's requests were accepted by Karzai would a real difference arise between Mansur's alliance and the Zakir-Peshawar position.⁷

Volatility And Trepidation

In practice, it will be difficult to attribute acts of violence against the electoral process to specific Taliban networks. This will become even more complicated if Mansur's conciliatory position forces some

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Antonio Giustozzi is an independent researcher who received his PhD from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and is currently associated with the War Studies Department at King's College London. He is the author of several articles and papers on Afghanistan, as well as four books: *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan, 1978-1992* (Georgetown University Press); *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency, 2002-7* (Columbia University Press); *Empires of Mud: War and Warlords in Afghanistan* (Columbia University Press); and *Policing Afghanistan* (with M. Ishaqzada, Columbia University Press, 2013). He also authored a volume on the role of coercion and violence in statebuilding, *The Art of Coercion* (Columbia University Press, 2011). Casey Garret Johnson has worked in Afghanistan since 2008, conducting research on tribes, politics and the insurgency for an Afghan research and peacebuilding organization and serving as a governance advisor with U.S. Agency for International Development in Kandahar.



UNITED STATES
INSTITUTE OF PEACE

2301 Constitution Ave., NW
Washington, D.C. 20037

www.usip.org

USIP provides the analysis, training and tools that prevent and end conflicts, promotes stability and professionalizes the field of peacebuilding.

For media inquiries, contact the office of Public Affairs and Communications, 202.429.4725

powerful but anti-election fronts within his alliance to realign with Zakir.⁸ Also, there is a possibility that the local deals cut during the 2009 and 2010 elections could return on a greater scale; that could lead to more polls opening but also more uncertainty in the minds of locals, preventing actual votes from being cast. Last but not least, Mansur's and Zakir's groups are trying to resolve their differences through negotiations, which could alter their attitude toward the elections.

In this volatile environment, the government of Afghanistan was reportedly approaching elders to lobby local Taliban to allow voting. Among elders there appears to be even less appetite than in 2009–10 to petition the Taliban given the mostly ineffectual or dangerous attempts to convince the Taliban in the past. There was no evidence, at least in mid-2013, that the Taliban as a whole would be more receptive to local entreaties. If deals are indeed struck, they will likely again be interest-based arrangements with local power brokers rather than the result of communities risking their lives to demand their constitutional and human right to cast ballots in a free and fair setting.

Notes

1. This brief is based on interviews conducted in the spring of 2013 with 37 Taliban insurgents, ranging from rank-and-file district level fighters to newly appointed election disruption commissioners to Peshawar- and Quetta-based upper-level leaders. Taliban interviews were supplemented and in some cases triangulated with another 26 interviews with elders living in Taliban-influenced areas. Geographically, the interviews were distributed as follows: Quetta 1, Peshawar 1, Baghlan 14, Balkh 5, Badghis 5, Helmand 4, Kandahar 9, Ghazni 4, Zabul 6, Logar 6, Nangarhar 11, Wardak 7, Ghazni 5, Kunduz 1.
2. The presence of these commissioners was confirmed by independent sources.
3. This was confirmed by another Peshawar commander.
4. Presidential candidates are required to submit 100,000 voting card identification numbers to be eligible. Provincial Council candidates must submit 200–600, depending on the size of the province. The ability of the Taliban to influence Provincial Council elections, where the voting margins of winning candidates tend to be very small, is significant.
5. Interview with Zakir subcommander, Ghazni Province
6. The Mansur alliance is allied with the Rahbari Shura, a group of respected mostly old-guard Taliban leaders who are not as powerful or as well funded as Taliban fighting groups such as the Peshawar Shura or the Zakir Alliance.
7. Similarly, a Kandahar-based representative of the Baradar front, which is part of the Mansur alliance, said that it was not yet clear what they would do with regard to the elections, although he believed that the withdrawal of foreign troops was still a condition for supporting the elections.
8. Some fighters from the Baradar and Dadullah fronts have already defected to join more radical groups. An interviewee in the Quetta Shura close to Mansur admitted that there were some people in Mansur's own network, within the Rahbari Shura and Baradar front, who were against the elections and opposed to Mansur's talks with Karzai so were negotiating with Zakir to join his alliance.