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The Taliban's View of the 2014 Elections

Summary

- The Afghan Taliban Movement has publicly rejected the legitimacy of the April 2014 elections.
- The Taliban's military leadership has issued instructions to officials and commanders to disrupt the elections but has left field commanders with wide discretion on how to go about doing so.
- Many in the Taliban follow the electoral contest closely and comment on developments in terms very similar to how they are described by the political and educated class in Kabul. However, the anti-election sentiment in the Taliban leaves no scope for any faction to cooperate with the process.
- The Taliban will likely be able to intensify violence approaching the election, but not sufficiently to derail the overall process.

Introduction

Afghanistan's 2014 election is widely seen as the critical test for the viability of the country's post-2001 political system. Stability following the withdrawal of international troops depends as much on a legitimately-elected and effective presidential successor to President Hamid Karzai as it does on battlefield outcomes. The Afghan Taliban Movement remains the principal organized armed opposition to the Kabul government and poses a viable threat. Lack of progress in 2013 toward a negotiated political settlement between the Taliban and the Kabul government dashed hopes that the Taliban might participate in the elections and join a post-NATO government. Instead the Taliban opted to fight to restore its authority in Afghanistan. A political component of this strategy depends on disrupting the election process and delegitimizing its outcome. This Peace Brief analyzes Taliban attitudes and intentions toward the 2014 elections and their ability to disrupt them.

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How the Taliban Are Organized

The Taliban Movement is hierarchical, with supreme authority vested in the leader (ameer) Mullah Omar. Although Mullah Omar is cloistered and plays no active role in running the Movement, several key deputies act in his name. This leadership centralizes appointments in the Taliban's nationwide parallel administration and military command structure. But the Movement is also a fraternity in which all members share status by virtue of having gained knowledge in the madrasa system or joined the jihad, and use this status to claim authority over the civilian population. The principle of subordination to the ameer dictates that Taliban across the country must obey the official line of opposing the elections. But the anti-hierarchical principle of fraternity

means that local commanders and officials can use a high degree of discretion in choosing how they will conduct this opposition.

Taliban Rhetoric about the 2014 Elections

The Taliban leadership has clearly rejected the 2014 elections in Afghanistan, a position articulated in Mullah Omar's October 2013 Eid statement. Eid statements are issued by the Taliban's Cultural Commission. The October statement denounced the elections as a meaningless "drama" and accused anyone participating in them of betraying their religion and the national interest. The statement suggests that elections held under foreign occupation are illegitimate. It claims that voting is futile in any case because the United States will pick the person it wants to run the country and fix the results accordingly. It cites the toppling of Egypt's Morsi government in July 2013 as evidence that the U.S. instrumentalizes elections in its attempt to project power. Significantly, while the published statement calls on the Afghan people to boycott the elections, it does not issue any threats. The Eid statement can be thought of as strategic guidance to the Movement and should be taken more seriously than the sometimes bombastic and unsubstantiated claims also issued by the Cultural Commission. The Taliban at all levels, from leadership figures to field commanders, refer to this guidance and say that the Movement is "boycotting" the elections.

The Taliban Military's Stance on the Elections

Taliban field commanders confirmed that they had been urged to disrupt elections so that the population does not participate. The head of the Taliban military, Qayyum Zakir, has briefed commanders and provincial officials that they must use all available means to disrupt the election. These instructions have been issued as general guidance rather than specific orders. Field commanders know that they have to decide how to operationalize this guidance. For example, commanders must decide whether to attack locations associated with the elections, personnel associated with the process, or voters and candidates.

Some eastern field commanders expressed dissent about this guidance—not because they favor the elections, but because their operating ability depends upon maintaining local popular consent. Attacking civilians associated with the election by intimidating voters would, for example, undermine that consent.

Afghan media have documented cases of Taliban field commanders in insecure provinces such as Ghazni targeting civilians who registered to vote. However the violence was inadequate to derail the voter registration campaign in 2013, as 3.4 million new cards were issued nationwide that year.

There are also rifts between pragmatists and hardliners within the Taliban Movement. A Taliban veteran from the north described a tussle in his province between those trying to intensify the conflict and those trying to mitigate the violence. Extremists had started to gather intelligence on provincial council candidates with a view to planning attacks. But commanders keen to avoid jeopardizing local support were wary of going after popular targets. (In the last election, these pragmatists even managed to get an operation against the head of the provincial election commission called off.) What Taliban actually do at the grassroots depends partly on the outcome of such local tussles between pragmatists and hardliners, with no unambiguous guidance from the leadership.

Political Commentaries from the Taliban Leadership

Despite the robust top-level rejection of the process, comments from many Taliban leaders and mid-level officials suggested that they follow the election process with interest and curiosity through broadcast media and the many online vernacular news services. Although some of their commentary elaborated distinctly Taliban perspectives, much of it was located within a wider Afghan national discourse.

The most prevalent view among Taliban, that the Americans will pick the winning candidate, is a belief shared by many non-Taliban Afghans as well.¹ Furthermore, Taliban believe that democratic institutions in modern Afghanistan are a facade because all key decisions rest with the “occupiers.”

One former deputy minister of the Taliban-era government argued that, irrespective of the process, the elections could not produce a legitimate outcome because the leading candidates lacked the qualities required of an Afghan leader. A former senior minister gave a Shariat-based defense of the institution of elections but lamented that the presence of foreign troops robbed the process of legitimacy.

A mid-level official provided an alternative, perhaps more profound, version of the argument that voting changes nothing. The country, he argued, is effectively divided into zones under Taliban influence and zones under government influence. In the former, the Taliban will prevail in ensuring that there is no election. But in the latter, the government will ensure there is an election. This election will therefore produce a president who inherits a divided country, and the conflict will continue irrespective of the electoral outcome.

Some Taliban in both leadership and field commander levels have expressed hope that the next president would be more serious about reconciliation and create an opportunity for an intra-Afghan settlement. However, the atmosphere in leadership circles is so hostile to the elections that no individual or faction dares either speak out against the electoral guidance or initiate a course of action counter to it. Taliban sympathetic to the election at most are just waiting to respond to a post-election opportunity.

Recent Taliban Efforts to Calibrate Their Violence

Given the Taliban's public rejection of elections, the question is whether the Taliban military can disrupt them. There are recent examples of the Taliban struggling to calibrate violence to match either the propaganda or strategic intent of the leadership. In November 2013, the Afghan government convened a consultative jirga to consider the Bilateral Security Agreement with the United States. The Taliban issued threats to the event and to all individual participants. In the end, however, they only managed to launch one abortive suicide attack, and the event proceeded. On a more strategic level the Taliban military tried to respond to the transition process by escalating the conflict nationwide to demonstrate that the “occupiers” were retreating due to military defeat. Taliban commanders were ordered to remain in their areas of operation rather than spend the winter in Pakistan, which had become the established pattern. The outcome was patchy. In the two key contested provinces in the south, the number of Taliban operations slightly increased in Helmand in December but fell in Kandahar. In the contested provinces of the east, Taliban were more active in the Kunar province in December, but attacks fell in the Laghman and Nangarhar provinces. Even where Taliban did fight into the early winter period, such as in Kunar, the upturn in activity was modest, with December attacks accounting for barely 10 percent of the annual total.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This Peace Brief was prepared in the course of a larger USIP-sponsored study on the rhetoric, ideology and politics of the Taliban armed campaign. The findings are based upon Taliban public statements, interviews with past and present Taliban members and the Taliban Movement's actions. Interviews were conducted by the author, Michael Semple, or reported to him by a researcher, during November 2013 to January 2014. Semple is a visiting professor at the Institute for the Study of Conflict Transformation and Social Justice (ISCTSJ) at Queen's University Belfast.

Implications of the Taliban's Rejection of the Election

A similar outcome can reasonably be expected from the Taliban military's efforts to disrupt elections. Groups in the provinces will carry out more attacks than they would have otherwise, but the increase in violence will be less dramatic and widespread than hoped for by Taliban hardliners or predicted by their propagandists.

It is realistic to expect a 25 percent increase in overall incidents relative to what might otherwise have happened. A proportion of these additional incidents, but by no means all, will affect election-related targets. The elections will thus be one theme in the ongoing Taliban campaign against the political order, and not the focus of a centrally organised and distinct campaign.

The Taliban's limited ability to operate in the main population centers, the willingness of some field commanders to refrain from targeting the population, and the Movement's inability to operationalize centralized plans mean that the scale of violence will probably not be sufficient to derail the elections.

On the other hand, the Taliban's ability to conduct electoral disruptions will increase as the year progresses. Their slow start up from winter and the occurrence of the poppy harvest make it difficult to increase tempo in April. This suggests that any delay of the election past the established April 5 date risks exposing it to more attacks.

Targeting the elections will be an opportunity for some within the insurgency to establish their hard-line credentials through high profile operations such as suicide attacks on Kabul or provincial centers, as well as localized examples of violent intimidation.

The overall effect of the incremental increase in operations, backed up by propaganda and armed intimidation, will be to reduce voting in Taliban-influenced rural areas of the south, south-east, east and more broadly in Pashtun areas. However, this Taliban factor will be only one among several factors affecting electoral turnout.

The most significant impact of Taliban pressure probably will be on electoral fraud rather than on voter turnout. The anticipated Taliban campaign will help create a category of stations which are difficult to monitor and inaccessible to voters and polling agents. Efforts to conduct mass fraud, either by the administration or local power brokers, are likely to focus on these stations. Likewise, worries about a depressed turnout in Taliban-affected areas can be used by apologists of "proxy voting" to legitimize this mass fraud and motivate the electoral authorities in the districts to facilitate it.

Notes

1. See for example, Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, *Justifying the Means*, USIP Special Report 326, March 2013.



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