



DIIS REPORT

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The elections
and political realignments
in Afghanistan

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Contents

1. Introduction	5
2. Political alliance-building before nomination	7
2.1 The opposition groups	7
a) National Coalition of Afghanistan	7
b) National Front of Afghanistan	7
c) Right and Justice Party	8
2.2 The pro-government groups	8
a) Technocrats	9
b) Karzai's family	9
c) Fundamentalists	9
d) Hizb-e Islami associates	9
3. Coordination structures	11
4. Political realignment during candidate nomination	12
5. Major Electoral Alliances	15
5.1 Ashraf Ghani's ticket	15
a) Junbish Milli Afghanistan	15
b) Hizb-e Wahdat-e Islami Afghanistan	16
c) Hizb-e Haq wa Adalat	16
d) National Liberation Front of Afghanistan	16
e) The Ismailis	16
f) Afghan Mellat	17
g) Harakat-e Inqelab Islami	17
h) National Movement	17
5.2 Abdullah Abdullah's ticket	18
a) National Coalition of Afghanistan	18
b) Hizb-e Wahdat-e Islami Mardumi Afghanistan	18
c) Hizb-e Islami Afghanistan	18
5.3 Pro-government tickets	19
5.4 The Islamists	20
6. Future implications of the electoral realignments	22
References	27

I. Introduction

The contest for the presidential election created significant political mobilization and re-alignment throughout 2013 in Afghanistan. Nearing candidate nomination, important political realignments have become quite evident. Nearly all Afghan political actors, in the government and opposition alike, attempted to improve their bargaining power, either through the establishment of new political forums or by forging new alliances. These political realignments and alliances were short-term, election-oriented and not aimed at the formation of stable political institutions. Rather, they manifested the intensification of the highly personality-centric and clientelistic nature of Afghan politics.

The incentives for these realignments varied. Some were linked to presidential ambitions, others to becoming part of a ticket with greater prospects for winning. Many players simply wanted to secure their futures through band-wagoning or to make a living out of the politics of candidate nomination. Given their fluid and constantly changing nature, the new alliances created more confusion than clarification.

A dozen political blocs, some quite controversial, emerged in the pre-nomination period. Positioning itself as the main political opposition, the National Coalition of Change and Hope, the main bloc opposed to President Hamid Karzai in the 2009 election, re-launched itself as the National Coalition of Afghanistan to pursue the twin goals of de-personalization of the political opposition and the expansion of its politico-ethnic bases beyond the traditional realm of Abdullah Abdullah's allies and cronies. The Right and Justice Party was a new political entity. It emerged as an important actor with reformist agendas, positioned between the government and the opposition. Co-opting Ahmadzia Massoud, an important actor within the Tajik Jamiat, as well as Hizb-e Wahdat-e Islami Mardumi Afghanistan and Junbish Milli Islami Afghanistan, the two major political parties with strong ethnic backing within the Hazara and Uzbek communities, established the National Front of Afghanistan. This Front made controversial statements about decentralization inside the country and attended a couple of high-profile international conferences which drew the condemnation of the government and of certain hyper-centralists and ethno-centrists. Karzai's ambiguous stance created confusion in his team. Hizb-e Wahdat-e Islami Afghanistan and Hizb-e Islami Afghanistan, the Arghandiwal faction, struck an alliance to work together in preparing for the election.

These parties and coalitions organized themselves within the framework of the Council for Cooperation among Political Parties and Coalitions. The Coalition mobilized the disparate political voices to push for electoral reform and to press President Hamid Karzai not to extend his term unconstitutionally. The Council, along with the individual coalitions and parties, played an important role in advocating electoral reform. By exerting constant pressure, the Council, parties and political coalitions persuaded Karzai to announce a date for the presidential election and to agree to some of the proposed electoral reforms, to which Karzai showed significant resistance. The Afghan technocrats, who lacked a recognized political forum, pushed for a national consensus. The Afghan-born US ambassador to Kabul, Zalmay Khalilzad, former finance minister Ashraf Ghani and former interior minister Ali Ahmad Jalali, among others, brought together the floating technocrats and attempted to convince others to reach a consensus on an individual basis favorable to them. The technocrats remained outside the Cooperation Council.

This paper looks briefly at the status of the wider political alignments before nomination for the 5 April presidential election, assesses how and why all these alignments changed overnight by transforming into electoral tickets and what implications these realignments have for the future government and Afghan mainstream politics. In the run up to candidate nomination, the status of the opposition and political actors was as follows.

2. Political alliance-building before nomination

Before the beginning of the nomination for the 5 April presidential election, the Afghan political groups and actors were divided into two broad camps, the opposition and the pro-government forces. The following provides a schematic landscape of the pre-nomination political alignments:

2.1 The opposition groups

a) National Coalition of Afghanistan

Abdullah Abdullah secured over 30% of the votes in the 2009 presidential election. After the electoral saga was over, Abdullah attempted to change his campaign slogan, 'Change and Hope', into a political opposition group. Karzai reached out to Abdullah to coopt him like his superior, the late Burhanuddin Rabbani, but Abdullah resisted this. The National Coalition of Change and Hope did not become a credible opposition group and was renamed the National Coalition of Afghanistan in December 2011,¹ in a move intended to reform the group by creating an organizational structure for it. An elaborate structure was drawn up, but it remained mainly on paper, without having any opportunity for translation into action. Abdullah's electoral landslide and his sustained though reluctant presence as the legitimate opposition to President Karzai won him political advantage over his rival.

The coalition endeavored to diversify its ethnic base, the most important factor in Afghan politics. Its 62-member leadership council reflected significant ethnic diversity: 23 Tajiks (34%), 22 Pashtuns (33%), 11 Shia-Hazara (16%), 4 Uzbek (6%), one Pashayee and one Aimaq (3%).² Other than his Tajik-Pannjshiri cronies, Abdullah failed to win the support of the major political actors from among the Pashtuns, Hazaras and Uzbeks. It was the biggest failure of this opposition group.

b) National Front of Afghanistan

The National Front of Afghanistan was established as an opposition coalition in November 2011. Major Afghan ethnic power-brokers with strong political influence formed its backbone. The Islamic Unity Party of the People of Afghanistan, a

¹ Declaration of the National Coalition of Afghanistan, Kabul, 22 December 2011.

² Secretariat, NCA, Leadership Council members, May 2013.

mainstream Hazara party led by Mohammad Mohaqqueq, a controversial political player, and the National Islamic Movement, the Uzbek political organization led by Abdul Rashid Dostum, a powerful Uzbek leader with strong influence in north-west Afghanistan, were the main players in this group. Ahmad Zia Massoud, former Vice-President and a key Jamiat-e Islami figure, and the Green Trend, a fledgling grassroots movement led by Amrullah Saleh, former Afghan Director of Intelligence and an outspoken critic of reconciliation with the Taliban, were important but lesser players in this alliance.³ The latter lacked a solid organizational framework, which indicated its ad hoc nature. Horse-trading in the context of electoral politics appeared more important than drawing up an agenda for this group.

c) Right and Justice Party

The Right and Justice Party is a fairly new entity in Afghan politics. After prolonged political deliberations,⁴ it was formed in November 2011 with a fairly diverse ethnic composition and a reformist agenda. Its diversity marks a struggle among the new wave of politicians to break with the mono-ethnic model of Afghan party politics of the past two decades. The party includes elements from former Afghan leftists, the Mujahidin, democrats and civil-society activists.⁵ It has not accommodated any major Afghan power-brokers and views both warlord politics and technocrats' involvement in the pervading mafia economy as a major impediment to Afghanistan's political development.⁶

2.2 The pro-government groups

The pro-government forces cover a number of different groups with different agendas, which were in disarray, awaiting guidance from President Karzai himself. The key pro-government forces were constituted by the Afghan technocrats, both inside and outside the government, such as Zalmay Rasul, Ashraf Ghani and Zalmay Khalilzad; religious fundamentalists such as Sayyaf and Hizb-e Islami elements; and the President's own family, in particular Abdul Qayyum Karzai and Mahmoud Karzai, the President's two brothers, who wielded significant political and economic power because of their brother being the President. The following were the key pro-Karzai groups before nomination:

³ Interview with Sardar Mohammad Rahimi, spokesman, National Front of Afghanistan, Kabul, May 2013.

⁴ Right and Justice Party, 'Qata nama (resolution)', 3 November 2011.

⁵ Thomas Ruttig, Afghanistan Analyst Network, 2011.

⁶ Interview with Mohammad Asif Ashna, spokesman, RJP, May 2013.

a) Technocrats

Three Afghan technocrats, Ali Ahmad Jalali, Ashraf Ghani and Zalmay Khalilzad, were active with a slogan about forming a national consensus, a concept that remained very vague. It was flagged by every Afghan politician, but generally it meant securing a loose coalition for a single ticket rather than engaging in substantive debates on electoral platforms. As in 2009, Ali Ahmad Jalali appeared earlier on the scene but quickly took a back seat. Khalilzad and Ghani took center stage, each mobilizing their groups of supporters in Kabul and elsewhere. The former in particular had greater experience in involving non-Pashtun politicians. Surprisingly, other than being of Pashtun ethnic origin, these Pashtun technocrats have never admitted an intention to establish political structures among the Pashtuns. They perceive that being Pashtun will be enough to secure them the support of the fragmented Pashtun tribal communities.

Zalmay Rasul, the longest serving aide to President Karzai, was also touted as a potential candidate. Rasul was perceived as subservient to Karzai but neutral in wider Afghan politics.

b) Karzai's family

Abdul Qayoum Karzai and Mahmoud Karzai, each in their own right, has influenced Afghan tribal-ethnic and business politics. Qayoum has served as a close aide to the President, while Mahmoud has been significantly involved in large-scale business enterprises and projects in the private sector. Qayoum has never been an important public figure, but Mahmoud has been involved in outrageous financial scandals and dubious business deals. The nomination of either of the two brothers was viewed with suspicion and read as an indication of the establishment of dynastic rule by the Karzais.

c) Fundamentalists

Abdul Rab Sayyaf represents the fundamentalist religious camp. Aligned with Karzai to secure resources and political clout, he remains a staunch critic of the Taliban. Sayyaf promoted the idea of a national consensus in his own term of office to construct a niche for himself in the post-Karzai environment. At one point, Karzai asked others to support his candidacy. Karzai similarly promised his support to many others too. Sayyaf felt isolated, as no serious candidate was prepared to enter into an alliance with him.

d) Hizb-e Islami associates

Many former Hizb-e Islami associates such as Omar Dawoodzai, former Ambassador to Islamabad and the current Interior Minister, Farook Wardak, the Education Min-

ister, and Karim Khurram, Chief of the Office of the President, are powerful actors in the current government and each one of them attempted to present themselves as a potential candidate having Karzai's support.

3. Coordination structures

The Cooperation Council of Political Parties and the Coalition of Afghanistan (CCPPA) was established in September 2012. Its aim was to structure the pressures on President Karzai, first to respect his constitutional term, second to reform the electoral law and electoral institutions, and third to serve as a formal structure to build more enduring political teams and alliances.

The Council brought together a wide spectrum of Afghan political groups, factions and individuals. It represented twenty different parties and factions and marked a movement towards more formal politics. It placed mounting pressure on the government to respect its constitutional term, insulate the electoral process and institutions against manipulation and influence by the executive, and provide more room for maneuver for the parties and individual political actors.⁷

Ticket-building fractured the Cooperation Council close to candidate nomination. Yet, this forum produced some success stories. The Council's recommendations were partially accepted. Giving in to increasing pressure, President Karzai announced 5 April 2014 as the date for the election, retained a complaints mechanism, the Electoral Complaints Commission, and accepted the indirect involvement of civil society in appointing the members of the Election and Complaints Commissions. Many more important proposed reforms were rejected, such as a new voter registry, a mixed electoral system and the retention of UN experts in the Complaints Commission.

The Council practically collapsed when its key members differed on the production of a common electoral platform and the formation of an electoral ticket. The intervention by the technocrats was decisive in the collapse of this forum. It created a division along technocrat and mujahidin fault lines, with the former attempting to mobilize the Mujahidin behind the latter's favorable candidate. The Council split into two important teams, led respectively by Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani. Abdullah mostly represents the Jihadis, Ghani the technocrats, but the two teams overlap in significant ways.

⁷ Hizb-e Islami, Hizb-e Wahdat-e Islami, National Coalition, Nahzat-e Milli, Right and Justice, Jamiat-e Islami, National Front, Junbish-e Milli Islami, Wahdat-e Islami Mardum, Afghan Mellat, Afghanistan Naween, Mutahid-e Milli, Nahzat-e Hambastagi, Iqtedar-e Milli, Hizb-e Islamiy-e Muttahid, Wahdat-e Millat, Nahzat-e Milli, Rawad Sabz, Harakat-e Milli, and Haqiqat Gond.

4. Political realignment during candidate nomination

The political alliances that were crafted, taking up significant amounts of time and energy, quickly unraveled on the eve of candidate nomination. The Cooperation Council for political parties and coalitions was rendered irrelevant when the National Coalition and National Front left it. This left the Right and Justice Party, which had served until then as the main intellectual driver behind the Council, stranded. A new ad hoc political structure, the Union for Electoral Coalition, came to the fore around Abdullah, projecting his political power and leadership skills largely in opposition to the technocrats, who attempted to reap the gains of alliance-building on the cheap.

The Afghan technocrats have always been marginal to Afghan local politics, but they have used their real and imagined government support and international leverage to coerce local politicians. This trick did not work as much this time, as Abdullah demonstrated firm resolve in standing for election again. There was a consensus among different layers of the Tajiks that the Pashtuns should be challenged for the leadership of the country. The unconditional support of nearly all the important Tajik leaders for Abdullah's team is testament to this statement. It was in this bid that Abdullah secured the support of Mohaqeq's Wahdat and Arghandiwal's Hizb-e Islami parties. For the past ten years Mohaqeq had largely been on bad terms with Karzai, who had truly marginalized him through co-opting and dropping him tactically. The threat of the return of the Taliban was also an incentive for him and his anti-Taliban Hazara constituency to form an alliance with groups that have the least in common with the Taliban. Abdullah was a more reliable partner under such circumstances. The registered wing of Hizb-e Islami did not have a chance to secure a slate on the Pashtun presidential ticket. Abdullah was simply the only option for Hizb-e Islami as a Pashtun party, and it half-heartedly took up this option.

In Afghan politics, it is only the physical presence of ethnic communities in key decision-making processes that creates a feeling of security. Institutions and processes have yet to gain significant relevance. As such, the Uzbeks had a deep feeling of remaining excluded from the top echelons of power, although they demonstrated exceptional skills in striking deals with Karzai to ensure that they had their relative say in influencing the politics of appointments and resource distribution. Yet they retained a deep sense of grievance against the Tajiks and Pashtuns in the north and north-east.

President Karzai did everything to split Junbish as a party, and many of its loyalists were co-opted by him. Yet, Junbish maintained its comparative coherence as the most organized party in Afghanistan. Atta and other Tajik Jamiatis, exploiting their leverage in the presidential palace and locally, marginalized the Uzbeks in Mazar city and more broadly across the north and north-east. Against this background, the Uzbeks promoted the slogan of the Turkic origins of the Uzbeks, Turkmen and Hazaras and attempted to bring them within a single political forum as the largest ethno-political grouping, aiming at nothing less than the position of First Vice-President. This was a way of saying gently to the Hazara leaders that it was time for the Uzbeks. They did not compete for the Hazara position as the third-ranking group but rather attempted to redraw the established hierarchy for the distribution of political power, the Uzbeks always being touted as the fourth most important player in Afghan politics.

Technocrats like Ghani and his fellows must be grateful to President Karzai for not intervening in the forging of electoral tickets. All the political players recognized Karzai's influence, power and capacity to make mischief, but Karzai nonetheless allowed a relatively interference-free environment for electoral alliances to take shape. All the aspirants waited to obtain Karzai's endorsement until the very last moment. As a result, actors closer to Karzai who, in addition to sharing common political and business interests with him and his family, had expected his support in return for the loyalty they had shown him over the past thirteen years failed to read him properly and, consequentially, suffered as they waited too long. Zalmai Rasul, Qayyum Karzai and Sayyaf, all expecting to be Karzai's choice, had forged the weakest political tickets by the end of the nomination process.

Weak teams formed of elements close to Karzai provided greater room for the technocrats to maneuver. Ashraf Ghani and Hanif Atmar had greater chances compared to Jalali and Khalilzad. Jalali does not have a tangible political track record, while as a US citizen Khalilzad stood no chance. Despite having a brilliant managerial track record, a sophisticated political stature, relations of trust with the non-Pashtuns and a political party in place, Atmar acted in a cowardly fashion. Among the technocrats, he was the favorite. It was Ghani who stepped in as the center stage player among the technocrats in the vacuum left by the fractured pro-President Karzai teams.

Undercutting his campaign against the non-Pashtun political players – dubbed the campaign against the warlords – Ghani turned to the most controversial ethnic power-player, Dostum, whom he had earlier described as an acknowledged killer.

Ghani, thus, capitalized on Uzbek grievances, deciding to promote their position from fourth to second in the power hierarchy, at least on his electoral ticket. Ghani also picked Sarwar Danish, a Hazara bureaucrat with recognized academic excellence but weak political and managerial skills, as his second running mate. Danish, connected to Khalili's Wahdat, a predominantly Hazara party, can secure important support for Ghani in the Hazara's decisive electoral constituency.

Ghani's team is controversial, but not weak. Ghani himself is recognized nationally and internationally as a controversial and hard-to-read character. Dostum's inclusion on his ticket as another disputed actor adds to the complexity of the team. Ghani's campaign against the non-Pashtun factions under the guise of warlordism during his ministerial tenure from 2002 to 2004, which left many of his own fellow Pashtun warlords outside the reach of his struggle, earned him a reputation as an ethnocentric figure among non-Pashtuns. His affiliation with the Kuchis through his brother, Hashmat Ghani, one-time head of the Kuchi council – a partially armed entity that has attempted to settle their land dispute through the barrels of guns outside the jurisdiction of Kabul's justice system – has created deep-seated mistrust between Ghani and the non-Pashtuns, especially the Hazaras. Furthermore, Ghani's ambiguous role in the Bonn Conference and in the subsequent struggle to construct a political framework for the new state system has intensified suspicions about his commitment to a pluralistic and democratic Afghanistan. Ghani has never genuinely engaged the Afghans and the country's democratic institutions and has never reported or written about his role and performance at the Bonn Conference, the Ministry of Finance or more recently as head of the Security Transition Commission. Common Afghans know little about him, and that only through the memoirs of foreign experts who have engaged with him on various issues. In his capacities in the Afghan government, he has relied more on his skills and international patronage than on the Afghans. He can at best be characterized as a technocratic autocrat than a democratic politician. In his government tenure, he had cynical views on democratic institutions such as parliament and political parties. As such, despite having presidential ambition, he never decided to create democratic structures. He has never attempted to articulate his vision about Afghanistan other than technical discussions on development. There are therefore doubts over what Ghani thinks about the future of Afghanistan. It will be a litmus test for him to articulate his stature and program. What everybody agrees is that he is a good state-builder, but whether that state will be democratic or ethnocentric in character remains to be seen.

5. Major Electoral Alliances

Of the twenty seven candidates in the preliminary list, fifteen were disqualified on the ground of submitting flawed registration papers. Abdul Qayyom Karzai, President Hamid Karzai's brother, under increasing pressure, stepped out of the race in favour of Zalmay Rasul on 6 March and General Abdul Rahim Wardak withdrew his candidacy on 15 March. The remaining nine candidates compete the election, over two weeks away from the polling day. Of the nine candidates, Abdullah Abdullah, Ashraf Ghani and Zalmay Rasul constitute the largest electoral blocs. These blocs are discussed in further detail below.

5.1 Ashraf Ghani's ticket

Lacking organized political structures both on national and local levels, Ashraf Ghani crafted the most incoherent ticket. His ticket is a conglomeration of conflicting forces, rather than an organized group. The nature of the alliance in his ticket will be a liability, rather than an asset for him if he wins this election. This reveals the ad hoc view and extreme political short-termism of the Afghan technocrats. The following outlines the key constituent groups of Ghani's haphazardous team:

a) Junbish Milli Afghanistan

Junbish was a key member of the National Front of Afghanistan, as well as the Cooperation Council for Political Parties and Coalition and Coalition for Electoral Union. All these ad hoc political coalitions collapsed overnight. In a dramatic turn of events, Junbish joined Ashraf Ghani's ticket, around which the disparate technocrats had informally coalesced. For Junbish it was a dramatic political shift, departing from its traditional ally, Mohaqeq's Wahdat Party, by joining a candidate who was perceived largely as anti-warlord and sympathetic to the restoration of the traditional domination of his community over Afghanistan. In the meantime, it marked an ethnic dislocation in the traditional hierarchy of power constellations in electoral contexts. In electoral politics, the Tajiks have always taken up the second rank position, irrespective of the numbers of votes they could deliver. This had turned into a convention for the division of power and a formula for ethnic appeasement. This change, however, now meant that the Uzbeks' revisionist approach to political alliance-making had turned out favorably, promoting their rank from fourth to second, at least on the electoral ticket.

b) Hizb-e Wahdat-e Islami Afghanistan

Hizb-e Wahdat forged an electoral alliance with Hizb-e Islami, with the aim of improving its bargaining power in the context of the election before the beginning of candidate nomination. Both parties were active members of the Cooperation Council. In breach of its commitment, Hizb-e Islami unilaterally struck a deal with Abdullah, leaving its partner, Hizb-e Wahdat, stranded. Tapping into a political void following Mohaqeq's alliance with Abdullah, Hizb-e Wahdat quickly sided with Ghani, facilitating a quick deal between Ghani and Dostum's Junbish Milli Islami.

c) Hizb-e Haq wa Adalat

The Right and Justice Party played an important role in the establishment of the Cooperation Council, but it failed to secure the support of the Council's constituents for its candidate, Mohammad Hanif Atmar. Instead of registering a candidate, the party sided with Ashraf Ghani. Atmar, the chairman of the Party's political affairs committee, is playing an important role in Ghani's campaign. The party's support of Ghani's ticket has caused an internal rift, splitting the party between two electoral tickets, Ghani and Abdullah. The younger members of the party feel disillusioned with Ghani because of the ethnic rhetoric of his informal campaign and his alleged lack of commitment to a pluralistic Afghan democracy and politics.

d) National Liberation Front of Afghanistan

Mujaddedi, head of the party and a close mentor of Karzai who played religious tricks in the previous presidential elections in support of Hamid Karzai, disagreed with Karzai over the bilateral security agreement with the US. Mujaddedi pushed for the immediate inking of the agreement but Karzai has evaded it ever since. In a show of anger, Mujaddedi's party declared its support to Ghani on 24 February (Pajhwok, 24 February 2014). Mujahddedi has his - now extended - religious and family network, but his party is far from being an active political organization.

e) The Ismailis

Sayed Mansour Naderi, the leader of the Ismailis of Afghanistan and head of the Hizb-e Paiwand Maihani, declared its support to Ghani on 13 February 2014. The Ismailis constitute an organized and progressive community in Afghanistan. As an organized constituency, their support to Ghani is important in terms of vote as well as in term of political inclusiveness of this team (Khaama press, 13 February 2013).

f) Afghan Mellat

The upsurge in campaign has forced many smaller groups to strike alliances with teams that have greater chances for victory. Afghan Mellat, an ethno-centrist Pashtun party has joined Ashraf Ghani on 6 February 2014 (The News International 6 February 2012). Afghan Mellat has faith in the establishment of an Afghan state with Pashtun characteristics (Ahady, A. 1995). It has a weak organizational structure and presence, but its ideology resonates favorably across the Pashtun belt - in particular in the eastern region of the country, where Pashtun ethnocentric attachment is stronger than elsewhere given its proximity to Khyber Pakhtunwa of Pakistan, where the Pashtuns run the provincial government. The term of this electoral alliance still remains unclear, but what is obvious is that the share of senior party leaders such as Anwar ul-Haq Ahadi as a technocrat in the future government should have been part of the agreement. Afghan Mellat's support to Ghani secures Pashtun votes but increases suspicion about Ghani as a recognized Pashtun centralist.

g) Harakat-e Inqelab Islami

Harakat was a radical Islamic party under the leadership of Mawlawi Nabi Mohammadi who switched to Taliban in the mid-1990s. Mohammad Musa Hotak, a former senior Taliban official and an MP in post-Taliban government, is heading this party now. On 25 February, the party announced its support to Ashraf Ghani in a big gathering in Kabul (Pajhwok, 25 February 2014). The party has limited influence in Wardak, but its past affiliation with Taliban may bring even Taliban votes for Ghani's ticket in the troubled Wardak province, where Taliban hold a large swath of territory.

h) National Movement

Mohammad Ismail Youn, who heads the National Movement, a fascist self-proclaimed Pashtun group, which views Afghanistan as the land of the Pashtuns, has joined Ashraf Ghani. Ismail managed the Zhwanddon television network, which was banned after Youn along with other Pashtun ethno-centrist intellectuals called the non-Pashtuns "bastards" who had to either accept the Pashtun supremacy or leave Afghanistan. This provoked a non-Pashtun counter-movement, which contested the claim that "Afghan" mean Pashtun only and that non-Pashtuns be not Afghans. The presence of extremist Pashtun groups both religious and ethnic in Ghani's team has created a growing fear among different layers of the non-Pashtun communities across the country.

5.2 Abdullah Abdullah's ticket

Abdullah Abdullah was better-placed to contest this election. He had won considerable votes in the 2009 presidential election and had ever since led a political platform, the National Coalition of Afghanistan, as the main opposition. As such, he was able to put together a ticket, which has made him the first most important challenger, although his ticket is far from being a coherent team. These are the constituent parts of Abdullah's ticket:

a) National Coalition of Afghanistan

The National Coalition of Afghanistan is built on Abdullah's electoral gains in the 2009 election. It enjoys relative democratic legitimacy, as it largely emerged from an election contest. Over time Abdullah has attempted to restructure it and broaden its ethno-political basis, and the NCA nominated him as its main candidate. Salahuddin Rabbani, acting head of Jamiat, Mohamad Younus Qanooni and Attah Mohammad Noor, nearly all major Tajik power-brokers, have aligned themselves with Abdullah's ticket. The NCA largely remains a Tajik-dominated group, with pockets of support among the Pashtuns in south, the Pashayes in the east and non-Hazara Shias in the center.

b) Hizb-e Wahdat-e Islami Mardumi Afghanistan

The head of this party, Mohammad Mohaqqeq, a controversial Hazara politician, has had a turbulent relationship with President's Karzai's government over the course of the last thirteen years. Mohaqqeq was a key player in the National Front, the Cooperation Council and the Union for Electoral Coalition. He waited long enough to see whether there was any possibility of striking an alliance with a candidate favorable to the government, but he finally signed an agreement with Abdullah Abdullah because of President Karzai's ambivalence in electoral alliance-making. Mohaqqeq has much in common with Abdullah on substantive issues such as decentralization, the institutionalization of political pluralism and the development of democratic institutions, but he remains at loggerheads with Abdullah over the distribution of resources and political power, the main issue in current Afghan politics. Politics is all about resource distribution, political and economic, in today's Afghanistan. Mohaqqeq's Party does have huge electoral significance in this election and will ensure Abdullah a decisive number of votes, for Mohaqqeq remains an unrivalled political figure among the Hazaras when it comes to political mobilization and representation.

c) Hizb-e Islami Afghanistan

Hizb-e Islami has fragmented into several factions. Arghandiwal heads the most organized faction, which is registered with the government. Pressed by Pashtun eth-

no-politics, Arghandiwal withdrew his initial consent to stand as the first running mate on Abdullah's ticket and allocated a lesser known party figure, Mohammad Khan, to Abdullah. Arghandiwal and Mohaqqueq, representatives of two important parties with strong ethnic constituencies, enhance Abdullah's power for electoral maneuver.

5.3 Pro-government tickets

President Karzai kept his close allies waiting until the very last moment. He did encourage everybody to stand in the election, but he built a team for none of them. Individuals who were viewed as possible choices of Karzai included Zalmay Rasul, Omar Dawoodzai and Qayyoun Karzai, among others. These people lacked the caliber to establish effective tickets without Karzai's support. By the time Karzai had made it public that he had no favorite, it was too late for his cronies to organize themselves. Many of his ministers who had thought their property and futures relatively secure began their nominations in great hurry. Nearly all the key ministers either stood as candidates or aligned themselves with others who were standing.

The most prominent candidates in President Karzai's camp include Zalmay Rasul, former foreign minister, and Qayyoun Karzai, the President's brother. Zalmay Rasul and Abdul Qayyoun Karzai were long touted as the favored Karzai candidates. Giving a signal to everybody, Karzai at best passively encouraged his cabinet members to stand in the election, including Rasul and Qayoum, his closest aides. However, Rasul and Qayoum have put in place the weakest teams, as they lack the personal charisma and political standing of Abdullah and Ghani.

Pro-President Karzai elements (Wardak, Arsala, Gul Agha, Qayoum and Rasul) attempted to to forge an alliance around Zalmay, the best candidate in pro-Karzai's electoral camp, through the mechanism of the Pashtun tribal institution, the Jirga. An expensive jirga of around 170 members⁸ were held in February 2014 in Kabul to craft a grand alliance for a pro-President Karzai's candidate. The Jirga in many ways proved counter-productive by widening the Ghilzai and Durrani's historical division, and intensifying the inter-Durrani competition for power. The non-Durrani such as Hedayat Amin Arsala and Dawud Sultanzoï criticized the Jirga as illegitimate while Gul Agha Shirzai, as a Barakzai chief, refused to join it and step down in favor of a

⁸ Thomas Ruttig, "A joint Durrani candidate for President? After the unity jirga in Kabul", Afghanistan Analysts Network, 5 March 2014.

Popalzai, Qayyom Karzai, Mohammadzai or Zalmay Rasul. Failing to create a grand ticket, the Jirga voted in favor of Qayyom, but President Hamid Karzai vetoed the Jirga decision, forcing Qayyom to step down in favor of Zalmay Rasul, a protégé of Hamid Karzai. Karzai apparently views his intervention in favor of his brother indefensible, as it will be touted as a dynastic extension of power. Instead, President Karzai pushes for Zalmay, otherwise known as the Medvedev of Afghanistan.

On 16 March, General Abdul Rahim Wardak withdrew his candidacy, tacitly indicating that he was forced to step down. Many believe he was pressed to step down in favor of Zalmay Rasul. A couple of lesser important Pashtun candidates might still step down in favor of Rasul before the 5 April, but these latest changes will not affect electoral constituencies in significant ways.

Hamid Karzai's latest intervention in favor of Rasul has triggered wider condemnation in the media and among the election challengers. An online campaign was launched in mid-March calling on President Hamid Karzai to stay neutral and stop supporting Rasul. The latest tribal realignment with intervention from Hamid Karzai has the potential to discredit and delegitimize the election as a process.

Overall, the Rasul team will still appear weak despite the latest developments in his favor at the instigation of President Karzai. But this will cut down Ghani's votes and improve Abdullah's prospects instead. Furthermore, the winning of this election by Karzai's protégé, Zalmay Rasul, by any means, will signify the retain of the status quo and will set in a new dimension to Afghan politics, which will affect the prospects for democratic developments in Afghanistan for years to come.

5.4 The Islamists

Sayyaf is the most important representative of Islamic fundamentalism in this election. Ismail Khan, another staunch jihadist, is his running mate. Sayyaf and Ismail Khan are well matched ideologically. The implication of Sayyaf in egregious human rights violations, including his direct role in the Afshar campaign of February 1993, is well documented. Ismail Khan has been more confrontational with the central government, while Sayyaf has been cunning and shrewd in exploiting the government to retain his influence. Ismail Khan is at best a loser in post-Taliban politics, having lost his mini-emirate in the western region to the central government following a violent confrontation. With accommodating Karzai leaving power soon, Sayyaf feels extremely insecure. By contesting this election, Sayyaf aims to craft a niche and a safety net for himself in the forthcoming government. At the moment this team, as

the main platform of the fundamentalists, will spoil considerable votes among the Tajiks and the Pashtuns and will prove as detrimental to Abdullah Abdullah as it is to Ashraf Ghani.

Qutbuddin Helal, a key aide of the absconding Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, is attempting to foster confidence between the armed wing of Hizb-e Islami and the government. His role is to legitimate the warring faction and ultimately facilitate a deal between Kabul and his egoistical boss. Less important individual candidates, such as Sultanzoi, Nader Naeem and Hedayat Amin Arsala, have sought nomination only to improve their political profiles.

6. Future implications of the electoral realignments

The politico-electoral alignments have changed dramatically over time. Before the start of the nomination, opposition groups such as the National Coalition of Afghanistan, the National Front and the Right and Justice Party, dominated the political environment. Disparate, but ambitious, individuals in the government with close ties to the Presidential Palace were expected to dominate the electoral politics given their extensive access to the Presidential Palace and support by President Hamid Karzai. Karzai's network – tribal, political, business-economic mafia – was and still continues to be the largest and most powerful network, connecting disparate pools of brokers from across the country to Kabul. The Afghan technocrats, each with a big ego and an irreconcilable character, were in total disarray, lacking both democratic and community-tribal structures for political mobilization. Individual competition among the technocrats for the highest position of power was another factor, fragmenting and fracturing their group, so as not to be reckoned with in a highly fluid and competitive electoral environment. They relied more on their technical skills and international patronage than their political capital in Afghanistan.

The current state of the electoral alignment is characterized by three major electoral blocs, the Reform and Solidarity bloc of Abdullah Abdullah (The Opposition), the Continuity and Change bloc of Ashraf Ghani (The Technocrats) and the Moderation bloc of Zalmay Rasul (The pro-President Karzai bloc). Each bloc overlaps with the others in significant ways. Representation of the major ethnic group and constituency in each ticket was the single most important factor in all these realignments.

The biggest winner in the political realignments is the technocrats who not only organized themselves, but also crafted splits in the Mujahidin-dominated opposition groups. The then weak and disparate technocrats, organized around Ashraf Ghani, now have changed into one of the pillars of the election, the second most powerful ticket in the country. Abdullah, as leader of the main opposition group, was not only able to maintain the integrity of his opposition group, the National Coalition, but was also able to win the support of Hizb-e Wahdat-e Islami Mardum Afghanistan, a major part of the opposition including one of the highly mobilized and decisive electoral constituencies, the Hazaras. Investing a significant amount of time and resources, Abdul Qayoum Karzai, President Karzai's brother, stepped down reluctantly against the resolution of an expensive Pashtun Jirga in favour of Zalmay Rasul.

President Karzai's intervention in electoral alliances after the nomination period has become evident and robust. He forced his brother to step down, fearing he would face strong accusation, if not direct reactions. He has interfered clearly in favour of Zalmay Rasul, dubbed now as the Medvedev of Afghanistan. Karzai fears his future, the future of his family business and power. Most importantly, he would like to play in a role in future Afghan politics. As a result, he has made it clear to support Zalmay Rasul, one of his longest-serving and most subservient aides in the last 13 years. In the meantime, regardless of extensive state resources, Zalmay Rasul's bloc is the weakest of the three major electoral blocs. Despite having a Tajik and a Hazara as first and second running-mates, Rasul may not be able to secure a significant amount of the non-Pashtun votes. The Pashtun constituency is divided among many Pashtun contenders.

Sayyaf and Qutbuddin Helal, the Hekmatyar-backed candidate, appeal to the Islamic radicals and the religious conservatives. Ghani has been able to mobilize cross-sections of the Pashtuns; the intellectuals, the youth, the ethno-centrists, the business-mafia brokers, community-tribal councils and so on. Ghul Agha Shirzai, the Barakzai chief of Kandahar, will spoil portions of the Kandahari votes, Karzai's heartland in southern Afghanistan. Rasul is subjected to considerable pressure from all sides of his Pashtun constituency. Tapping into Karzai-linked and state-sponsored networks, he will still maintain his stature as the leader of the third most important electoral bloc, but his chance to make it to the run-off is now seriously questioned and government intervention in favor of Rasul is therefore genuinely feared. Many Afghan commentators and political candidates perceive that President Karzai's call on non-interference by foreigners is a cover up for his own meddling. This means that in the post-rigging environment donors and international monitors will press for electoral transparency. To counter such pressure, President Karzai has already begun a pre-emptive media campaign against external scrutiny of the election.

The dramatic political realignments for the 5 April 2014 have once again revealed the weaknesses inherent in Afghan mainstream politics. Afghan politics still lack basic democratic structures such as solid political parties and movements with articulated platforms and visions. Politics is still played out in a highly personality-centric fashion. A strong individual is required to craft ethnic, factional, tribal, linguistic alliances from scratch for an event such as an election. Such alliances, which reflect transitory accommodation and reconciliation of competing interests of often conflicting groups with divergent agendas or lack of such altogether, make the formation of a coherent government impossible. Since 2001, democratic politics has followed a linear process

of ad hoc alliance formation and fragmentation. Many factors account for this situation: The Afghan hyper-centralized presidentialism, the anti-party electoral law, President Karzai's perverse politics of cooptation and the cynicism of the technocrats and the Mujahidin towards stable democratic institutions and political developments all account for the existing involution of the political institutions. Technocrats must be largely blamed for the underdevelopment of political institutions. They had and have no other means of creating democratic structures and build stable constituencies for themselves, and they have had the time, the intellectual capital and resources to build political institutions, but they didn't, viewing that the development of institutional politics in the form of political parties would empower the warlords and the non-Pashtuns at the expense of their own fractured Pashtun constituency.⁹

Each of the three major blocs, the Abdullah, Ghani and Rasul tickets, is constituted by disparate groups with conflictual interests. The conglomeration of these groups within the electoral tickets will affect the formation of an effective government in the future irrespective of which one of the teams wins the election. Overall, the nature of the political alignment in this election does not mark a break with previous electoral politics. In the previous elections, President Hamid Karzai used unaccounted resources to construct artificial alliances of tribes, ethnic factions and business-mafia groups, and brought together individual strongmen to ensure his victory. After winning, the President often bribed his allies – those with the potential to harass his government – with state resources and marginalized those that lacked the caliber to pressure him effectively and threaten his power.

Abdullah Abdullah's ticket is constituted by three competing forces, the Jamiat, the Hizb-e Islami and Hizb-e Wahdat-e Mardum. These forces have been in competition with one another over the establishment of control with state resources and offices. This will remain a problem with Abdullah's ticket, affecting the efficiency of his team. Abdullah as an individual is more likely to contest this election than anybody else, as he won over 30% of the votes in the 2009 election and has been leading the mainstream political opposition, the National Coalition, ever since. Abdullah is also one of the most experienced Afghan diplomats and is recognized as a moderate politician with a democratic vision. Abdullah's political stature and vision has greater resonance with a democratic, pluralistic and inclusive Afghanistan. The weakest link in Abdullah's ticket is lack of expertise and vision for state-building and development. Abdullah along with his running mates have fundamental weak-

⁹ Andrew Reynolds, "The curious case of Afghanistan", 2 April 2007.

nesses in the administering of the technical aspects of a state-building project. This will bear implications for international aid management and the execution of public administration and governance programs.

By contrast, Ashraf Ghani is generally viewed as an established asset, fit to construct state structures and institutions in a post-conflict setting. Ghani's ticket will contribute to the wider state-building program, but Ghani is a technocratic autocrat, rather than a democratic politician, who must lead a country which is highly diverse ethnically, linguistically, culturally and politically. Many Afghans, in particular the non-Pashtuns, fear that the election of Ghani – given his heavy-handed and ethnically-tainted approach in the recent past – will undermine the current democratic process. Ghani has not so far been able to address these concerns in his campaign. Rather, he has further intensified such suspicions by striking alliances with ethno-centrist circles and talking about unequal ethnic shares in the Bagram detention facilities and international aerial bombardment. Furthermore, Ghani's ticket is the most incoherent team. Lacking political structures for mobilization, he has engaged in haphazard alliance-building, modelled on President Karzai's perverse model of tactical cooptation. Ghani has a variety of people in his ticket, ranging from Dostum, the northern strongman, to Anwar ul-Hadi, a Pashtun leader of Afghan Mellat, to Musa Khan Hotak, a former Taliban official, to Haji Zahir Qader, an MP from the east accused of trafficking and tax evasion, and myriads of lesser actors. It will be difficult, if not impossible, for Ghani to accommodate these divergent interests in his government without compromising the efficiency and integrity of his administration.

Following the latest government intervention – from the organization of a Pashtun Jirga to the forcing of Qayyum to step down in favor of Rasul – it has become an established fact now, as was speculated before, that Rasul is Hamid Karzai's man in this election. Karzai's reluctance to reform the electoral institutions, his preemptive media campaign against likely Western meddling in the election, and his government's struggle to craft a wider Pashtun alliance in favor of Rasul point to the "Putinization" of power politics in Afghanistan. Afghan analysts and the media have widely talked about Karzai's intention to constitute the Putin-Medvedev model in Kabul. Inaugurating the parliament's fifth legislative year, President Karzai – who had criminalized discussions about systemic change – outlined the need for constitutional reform in Afghanistan. The construction of a house for Karzai's family in the Presidential Palace is another indication of Hamid Karzai's strong resolve to remain directly engaged in the next government.

The Afghans badly need to change their guards. This election provides the only opportunity to do so. Hamid Karzai's meddling in favor of his protégé, Zalmay Rasul, complicates the situation and at best retains the status quo. At the moment Afghanistan is in a deadlock on many critical issues, ranging from the signing of the Bilateral Security Agreement to the reconciliation with Taliban, counter-insurgency and counter-corruption. These multi-faceted deadlocks will not be broken unless a new team is brought to power through democratic means.

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