

Institute for Policy Reforms

Press Release

Chance of Peace in Afghanistan

Though recent developments offer some hope for peace in Afghanistan, it is too early to consider them a turning point. This is stated in a Brief titled Afghanistan: Hopes and Perspective, issued today by the Institute for Policy Reforms, written by Pakistan's well-known former Foreign Secretary, Riaz Mohammad Khan.

The Brief cautions that there can be no peace without talks between the Afghan Taliban and the Kabul government. It recognizes that "American nod to the Afghan Taliban and removal of the self-imposed taboo on direct contacts with them" is an important change terming it "a half-way recognition of the Taliban". Yet, progress is uncertain and the hope of concluding it by April, voiced by Ambassador Khalilzad, seems ambitious.

On its part, Pakistan has sent important signals. Referring to the chaos that followed Soviet withdrawal and US detachment in 1990s, Pakistan Prime Minister recently said that his country does not wish for early exit of US forces from Afghanistan. Pakistan also released Mulla Baradar and pledged to prevent Taliban operations from within its territory. It has persuaded the Taliban to participate in the peace process.

Another promising sign was presence of both the Kabul government and Afghan Taliban in the Moscow and Abu Dhabi meetings. This is a step forward, though the two parties did not talk. There was also visible cooperation between Pakistan and USA in Abu Dhabi, which too bodes well. USA has departed from its traditional singular goal of destroying the Taliban. Until recently, USA also had pressured Pakistan to target the Taliban. Since engaging with the Taliban, USA appears to have nuanced its demand.

A major change is Pakistan's recent emphasis for promoting South Asian connectivity, including prospect of land transit to Afghanistan. This perhaps reflects Pakistan's weariness with the Afghan conflict and its economic costs. The Brief further says that "Arguably Pakistan should look positively, if transit trade can reinforce India's stake in Afghan stability".

But is peace at hand? There is much to do before the Afghans can have stability after decades of volatility. Challenges abound. Both the Kabul government and Afghan Taliban are averse to mutual accommodation. The former are holding ground, banking on continued coalition support because of concern about re-emergence of extremists in Afghanistan. The Taliban are confident of their strength and, in any case, loath power sharing.

Complicating an already difficult situation is internal division in both camps, which limits the space for negotiators. While the Kabul government is recognized internationally, internally it is "riven with political and ethnic dissension". Challenged by warlords and the

Taliban, its writ beyond Kabul is possible only with US support. Despite efforts, it has yet to create a viable economy or build an effective national army.

Taliban too face similar discord. They are divided and may have kept the façade of unity by rallying around the single goal of opposing presence of foreign troops in the country. This is why Pakistan's recent statement about continued presence of US forces is even more significant.

The Brief weighs the prospect for peace that recent developments may perhaps bring. It emphasizes the need for direct talks between the Taliban and Kabul government. "To expect that the Taliban will work out an agreement with the American occupation power is denying the reality of Afghanistan." Outsiders can influence, but cannot negotiate. Pakistan should also do its bit to try to persuade Afghan Taliban to sit across the table with the Kabul government.

The main test of progress lies in reduction of violence, "the kernel of the beginning towards peace". From there, ceasefire, prisoners' release, some kind of acceptance of Taliban influence, and the latter's pledge to not allow extremists to operate again "could pave the way for power sharing". Pakistan can play a role by exploring and prodding the three parties in this regard.

In the end, it is up to the Afghans to realize the promise for peace brought about by recent developments. Prolonged suffering by the Afghans should be reason enough to soften their prejudices and mutual suspicions