

## Ghani is running out of options in Afghanistan

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Afghanistan is in dire crisis as the Taliban battle a weak government, and peace talks with the militants are put on hold, writes guest columnist Ahmed Rashid.

The Taliban have captured most of Helmand province, including for several days a strategic district headquarters, Musa Qala. They are growing stronger in the north and east holding more territory than ever before and mounting ferocious attacks in Kabul in which some 100 people have been killed in the past few weeks.

Talks between Afghanistan and the Taliban and Pakistan are at an impasse following the recent announcement of the death of Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar in 2013. Afghan criticism of Pakistan for allegedly not reining in the Taliban is increasing daily.

President Ashraf Ghani's approval rating has fallen from 50 percentage points to 38, while his partner in power Abdullah Abdullah's ratings are even lower, according to Tolo news. The government is paralysed, apparently incapable of still filling empty slots in the cabinet, while key projects such as identity cards and electoral reforms are on hold and mired in controversy.

Image caption President Ghani's popularity ratings are apparently in steep decline at the moment  
The government has failed to tackle corruption or bolster the economy. There is large-scale capital flight, especially to the Gulf where many Afghans have bought houses. Afghans constitute the third largest group of migrants after Syrians and Iraqis trying to escape into Europe by land and sea.

The international community is delaying or withholding vital financial contributions to a government that has long run out of money. Some government salaries have not been paid for months.

Afghanistan's army is heroically struggling to contain the Taliban and hanging on to district capitals but is incapable of going on the offensive or regaining lost territory. Officers are struggling to contain sizeable desertions from the army and police by refusing home leave. The casualty rates are the worst ever and according to US officers, "unsustainable". The remaining US and Nato forces are expected to leave at the end of the year.

According to the New York Times, about 4,100 Afghan soldiers and police have been killed and another 7,800 wounded in the first six months of this year. That is 50% more than the same period last year. Meanwhile warlordism is back with a vengeance as leading figures from the 1980s jihad (holy war), including Vice President Rashid Dostum, Balkh province Governor Atta Mohammed Nur and others raise militia armies across the country.

The country's best hope in years - opening talks with the Taliban - has been stymied by the leaking of Mullah Omar's death. Pakistan and some Taliban leaders tried to keep it secret for unknown reasons until the news broke after the first meeting between the Taliban and Afghan officials in Pakistan on 7 July.

Image caption Peace talks have been suspended since Mullah Mansour (right) replaced Mullah Omar  
Mullah Omar's death has created a struggle for power within the Taliban and there is a growing conviction amongst many ordinary Afghans that Pakistan is trying to install its chosen favourite, Mullah Akhtar Mohammed Mansour, as the new Taliban leader.

It also became clear that Jalaluddin Haqqani, a leading jihadi figure wanted for terrorism by the US and a major Taliban operative also died a year ago.

This lack of transparency has destroyed the trust between Afghanistan and Pakistan. In his opening address to the Taliban, Mullah Mansour took a belligerent stance, dismissing talks about peace as "enemy propaganda". Before that he was seen as a moderate figure.

Meanwhile in Kabul, new anti-Ghani groupings are emerging, especially among those who resent the president surrounding himself with fellow Ghilzai Pashtuns.

In conversations with many Afghans over the last few months there seems to be a growing consensus that Afghanistan's internal sovereignty is at stake and that the national unity government has not worked. Many feel constitutional changes are urgently needed in order to prevent the disintegration of the country, a coup by one or more warlords or a section of the army, or a power grab by disgruntled politicians.

One popular solution being hotly debated by Afghan intellectuals and politicians is for President Ghani to call an emergency loya jirga that would choose an interim government and president for a period of no more than a few months. Such a grand assembly would then initiate debate and pass constitutional and electoral reforms, as President Ghani and Mr Abdullah had promised to do when they were installed as joint power holders in the national unity government.

Image caption Afghan security forces are battling a resurgent Taliban after Nato combat troops withdrew  
These reforms would introduce constitutional amendments to make the country a parliamentary democracy - something that the non-Pashtun groups and many urban Afghans have been demanding since 2001. These reforms could be coupled with a renewed attempt to bring the Taliban into talks or even encourage them to take part in the loya jirga debate. The Taliban have made it clear that they also want changes to the constitution.

Finally after the passage of new electoral laws that would eliminate vote rigging, and the issuance of new ID cards, the interim government would oversee fresh parliamentary elections. The newly elected parliament would then choose a new prime minister to lead the country and a president as head of state, after which the interim government would resign. Ambitious and difficult though such a path may be, many Afghans are convinced that ultimately Mr Ghani has no choice but to radically shake up the system. If he takes such a risk then who knows - he may remerge as the winner once again.