

Karzai Receives Mixed Reviews on Approach to Peace Process

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Ahmad Rashid, the famous Pakistani journalist and best-selling author of multiple books on foreign policy issues in the region, explained in an exclusive interview with TOLONews on Thursday how President Karzai has both hit and missed the mark so far in his handling of the peace process.

Rashid expressed strong support for President Karzai's reaction to the "Islamic Emirates" controversy that surrounded the opening of the Taliban's Doha Office.

Referring to the incident, Rashid said, "I think President Karzai was completely right about that. His objections were perfectly justified because there was an agreement already in a document signed between the Americans and the Taliban that the office would not be called the Islamic Emirates and there would be no flag."

Nevertheless, Rashid's focus was on criticisms of the Afghan President's inability to develop a coherent and consensus-based approach to the negotiations.

"He has not been able to create a consensus within his ranks, within his cabinet, within the presidency, within the public, within the political parties in favor of talks, and the terms and conditions of those talks," the Pakistani journalist said.

Faizullah Jalal, an Afghan political analyst from Kabul University, echoed Rashid's criticisms of President Karzai's job handling the peace process so far. "The fact is that President Karzai, his vice president and his entire team is a big part of Afghanistan's problems, and until this team is out of power, Afghanistan's problems will go unsolved," said Jalal.

According to Rashid, the incoherence and weakness of President Karzai's approach to the process has been caused by a variety of contradictory opinions circulating within his own inner circle as well as his lack of engagement with the diverse stakeholder groups of Afghanistan.

Discussing the consensus that he believes must be at the foundation of any fruitful negotiation process, Rashid said, "You don't build a consensus by inviting four to five of the old Mujahadin leaders to the presidency, which is what Mr. Karzai does."

Rashid posed the question: "What about the young people, the women, the business men, the educationalist - people who have a big stake in the future of Afghanistan?" But, as has been made clear by the role of the U.S. in navigating the events surrounding the opening of the Doha office in recent weeks, the international community also expects to have a hand in determining the course of the negotiations.

"They (the negotiations) will involve outside powers, Mr. Karzai cannot expect that it will only be Afghan-to-Afghan. They will involve the U.S., Nato countries, Pakistan and India. The point is Afghanistan is an international issue. Peace in Afghanistan can only be brought about by international agreement," said Rashid.

On the subject of Pakistan, Rashid attempted to dispel suspicions of the intentions of his country, which has been considered a long-time backer of the Taliban, being those of obstruction in the peace process. "It's not in Pakistan's interest to see a Taliban government in Kabul. It is not in Pakistan's interest to disrupt the process," maintained Rashid.

He cited the increasing Taliban-led violence in his country as reason for a shift away from support for the insurgent group within the Pakistani government and broader public. However, considering Pakistan's recent record when it comes to politics in Afghanistan, not everyone has expressed agreement with Rashid's assessment.

Tahir Hashimi, a political science professor at Kabul University, maintained that, "The main reason for Afghanistan's problem is Pakistan and its intelligence services. Pakistan, in the past ten years, has not been honest in its promises to Afghanistan."

Looking ahead, it appears clear that both domestic and foreign interests will play substantial roles in shaping Afghanistan's peace process. What remains less clear is just how exactly President Karzai and his government plan on engaging those interests in formulating a strategy entering into negotiations, and then executing it once talks actually begin.