

Views on conflict, peace, democracy and political reform in Afghanistan

Younus Qanooni

Younus Qanooni joined Ahmad Shah Massoud's *mujahidin* based in his native Panjshir Valley following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. He was involved in establishing the Northern Alliance and served as Interior Minister in Burhanuddin Rabbani's government. He was chief negotiator for the Northern Alliance delegation to the Bonn conference. Mr Qanooni was minister in the post-Bonn Interim Administration and Education Minister in the Afghan Transitional Administration (established in June 2002), and was a security advisor to interim President Hamid Karzai. He is a former Vice

President of Afghanistan and Speaker of the Afghan parliament (*Wolesi Jirga*), and is currently leader of the *Afghanistan e Naween* (New Afghanistan) political party.

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ABSTRACT

What institutional changes are needed to establish sustainable peace in Afghanistan, and how might such changes be achieved?

In conversation with *Accord*, former speaker of parliament Younus Qanooni outlines his perspectives on the causes of violence in Afghanistan, priorities for dialogue to negotiate potential ways forward, challenges of sequencing peace talks and elections, and longer term options for political reform.

The dilemma of whether to prioritise a military or political solution to the conflict can be resolved by pursuing both together – but with clearly defined mutual objectives. Force should be aimed at convincing the Taliban to negotiate. Efforts to reintegrate Taliban fighters outside a political settlement will continue to fail. The emphasis needs to be on reconciliation, which demands serious concessions from both sides.

Elections present another dilemma for peace: the government will not negotiate before elections; but afterwards the Taliban will not engage with a government that claims a mandate without their involvement. A solution is to let the Taliban play a part in the elections which would create conditions for a ceasefire and a nationwide process.

Afghanistan lacks the necessary institutions to support the existing presidential system. A parliamentary system with strong parties would enable representative politics that can break down tribal or ethnic mobilisation. A step towards this is to have a prime minister as head of the executive, a speaker of parliament heading the legislature branch and a chief justice heading the judiciary. The president can bring these three branches together within a balanced system.

Causes of violent conflict in Afghanistan

Our strategy for achieving peace must be related to our understanding of the root causes of the conflict in Afghanistan. Experience and facts show that the roots are mainly external as four decades of conflict have been imposed on Afghanistan on the basis of strategies which Afghans had no hand in designing.

The common thread between the 19th century wars with the British, the Soviet invasion and the current conflict is that they have all been imposed on Afghans. Peace depends on us understanding and addressing these

external conflict drivers. Over the past two decades of our war with the Taliban, the creation of the Taliban movement and their mission in Afghanistan have been an expression of Pakistan's Afghan strategy. Pakistan, with whom we share a long border, is the neighbour with most influence in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has helped to prolong the conflict in Afghanistan because, unfortunately, one of the four pillars of that country's national security doctrine is the notion that there must be a pro-Islamabad government in Kabul.



Younus Qanooni in the Polish Senate, 2008. © Michal Koziczynski

Experience since 1947 shows that Pakistan has experimented with three versions of its strategy in Afghanistan. In one variant Pakistan has tried to construct an Afghan government to its own liking. In another, it has tried to infiltrate the existing government, hoping to determine that government's foreign policy. In the third, it has tried to destabilise the sitting government in Kabul.

If you look back to the periods of Zahir Shah and Daud Khan and at all the governments since then, during each period you will find that Pakistan applied one of the three variants of this strategy. But in the Taliban period, the Pakistan strategy reached the pinnacle of its success. In those years, the Pakistanis were able to fashion a government according to their plan. Therefore, if the Pakistanis today are supporting a return to power for the Taliban, it is to regain this position of ultimate influence and as part of their strategy against India. This strategy has economic, political and military components.

However, one key feature of the Pakistani strategy is that they always rely on internal partners to implement it. Although the roots of the conflict in Afghanistan are external, there is an important role for domestic actors in facilitating the execution of the strategy which sustains that conflict. Pakistan has deliberately avoided deploying its own army to fight in Afghanistan. Instead it relies on Afghan forces, which it has helped to create and through which it achieves a military, economic and political presence in Afghanistan. And if any one of the Pakistani tools should fail, it will rapidly produce another. If we succeeded in persuading the Taliban to abandon the fight, I have little doubt that Pakistan would prepare another force to take forward the conflict.

Achieving peace in Afghanistan

If we are to progress towards peace, we shall require tough negotiations with countries of the region, including Pakistan. We should be prepared to put on the table all the legitimate demands that countries of the region and Pakistan have of Afghanistan. We should face the fact that there are legitimate demands which a country can make of its neighbour. Pakistan has a right to demand that it should face no threat to its security from Afghanistan. But equally we have the right to demand the same of Pakistan. We should address the issues affecting all states which have had a role in the Afghan conflict in this spirit, through fair and transparent negotiations. Our citizens would never accept conceding any illegitimate interest. However, they will have no objection to conceding legitimate interests and we should seek to reach agreement on this basis.

The other strand to pursuing peace in Afghanistan concerns the establishment of a strong government. But not the strength that comes from military force. Rather, a government which is strong because of its popular support among Afghans on one hand, and its good relations with the international community on the other. It will require far-reaching changes for a government in Afghanistan to become strong in this sense. But this is necessary to create the conditions for economic, political, social and cultural progress. As part of the process, we must build leadership capacity within government and its institutions. If our government has genuine popular support, it will be able to resist every form of foreign interference. Unfortunately, Afghanistan has always had either weak or failing governments. Nowadays Afghanistan has a failing government. Under Karzai, the government was just weak. Nowadays the government is failing – it has lost its central authority and capacity to operate.

In summary, there are two main strands to the strategy required to achieve peace in Afghanistan. Strand one involves defeating the strategy of those external players who try to impose a war on us. The second strand involves the establishment of a genuinely popular and strong government.

Experience shows that even while the US had a heavy military footprint in Afghanistan, it was not possible to achieve a military solution to the problems of Afghanistan. Today, we can be even more certain that it is not possible to achieve a military solution. Therefore, irrespective of whether we happen to support or oppose the Taliban, let us accept that they are a part of the political reality.

The solution is neither fighting nor negotiations. The solution is negotiations alongside the fighting. But negotiations and war-fighting must both have clearly

defined objectives. The main purpose of our war-fighting should be to convince the Taliban that negotiations are the only way out. Unfortunately, up to now the government has focused on achieving the reintegration of the Taliban fighters. But this is a futile effort; under no circumstances will the Taliban settle for reintegration. To get the Taliban on board, the government has to be prepared to embrace the idea of reconciliation. But reconciliation has to be carefully defined. The reconciliation which the Taliban are prepared to accept is entirely different from the reintegration which the government has hitherto had in mind. This leaves us with a challenge.

Winning the Taliban over to participation in a peace process will require them to shift a long way from their current position. For the moment, the Taliban work on the assumption that this is a weak government, only propped up by the Americans and bound to collapse if the Americans withdraw. The reasons that we are at an impasse with regard to negotiations include the differences of vision of what the negotiations are leading to and the fact that the Taliban seek to externalise the process. Because they consider the government dependent on the US, they demand that they should negotiate with the US.

I have worked on several formulas to get around this impasse. Peace has a price, just as war has, and we have experience of both. The government of Afghanistan should be prepared to make a sacrifice for peace. If the government of Afghanistan finds itself in a position where it must choose between peace and staying in power it should choose peace.

Sequencing elections

The link to the Kabul political timetable presents another challenge. The trouble is that negotiations are difficult whether before or after elections. Before the elections, the government is not prepared to negotiate. After the elections, the Taliban will not be prepared to surrender to a government which claims a mandate without the Taliban. The challenge for us is how to rework the relationship between elections and negotiations to create an opportunity.

Let the Taliban play a part in the elections. For the Taliban to reach agreement with the current administration, they would have to accept the legitimacy of a government they have dismissed as a puppet, which in Afghan terms would be a massive climb-down. The Taliban insist that there must be a difference between them and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

When Gulbuddin surrendered to the government, there was a strong reason for doing so. He had no military force

left. All the rest of his Hezb-i Islami movement was already a part of the official system and only he and his family were left outside. The agreement with the government provided a respectable way for him to come in from the cold. In contrast, the Taliban have their military force, their leadership and membership intact. Therefore, we should think of ways for those Taliban who want peace to participate in the 2019 elections. If the Taliban, rather than surrendering to the government, play a role in helping to establish the government, they can reconcile with their Afghan pride intact.

My proposal is this – first of all the government should prepare itself to pay the price of peace. Then the government should bless the continuation of Track 2 talks with the Taliban. The government of Afghanistan remains the official authority. But they should create the space for Track 2 to proceed. In the course of Track 2 we can raise the issue of the elections and seek the involvement of the Taliban. Then we can establish a broad-based platform, including the Taliban.

The current president of Afghanistan might choose to be part of that team or he might choose to stay out. He can make a new bid for power, or he can decide not to. But if we go ahead with the talks we can convince the Taliban that the elections are a process which they can be a part of. Then we can talk of a ceasefire. Eventually, when the Taliban join the government they can tell their supporters that they brought this process about.

A Taliban agreement to participate in elections would create the conditions for a ceasefire and a nationwide process. We would have to form a broad-based national team. We could address the issue of reform to the constitution and structure of government. We formulate a government taking into account the participation and representation of all the peoples of Afghanistan. This is how we can attain real peace and stability.

Political reforms required for peace

As Afghans we are under no obligation to implement any one model of government. Afghanistan is a complex country with diversity of ethnicity, language, religion and sect. This is one of the strengths of the country. We need to find a system which offers expression to this diversity. All the peoples of Afghanistan should see themselves with a stake in that system. All the political parties of Afghanistan, through democratic channels, should gain a stake in that system. Power should be obtained and exercised through legitimate mechanisms.

The current mixed political system, a watered-down version of the American system, has not worked. The

presidential system has worked in America because it is combined with a federal system. Authorities are allocated between the federating units, there is a fully functional constitution and the units have their own budgets.

We introduced the American presidential system without the accompanying institutions. We need a system which gives expression to the ethnic and social diversity of this country, which is why I have concluded that a parliamentary system is required.

We have experienced ethnic confrontation. Let there instead be ideological contests. Let us have a system with strong political parties. Healthy politics is only possible when national parties take hold. People need political vehicles to represent them and to help them in reaching their objectives, gaining the kind of services they require from their government. Those vehicles should be political rather than tribal or ethnic. This political development will maintain our national unity. If people do not have access to political parties and civil society organisations, they inevitably lean on their tribe, language group and religion. Instead of taking Afghanistan forward, such politics can take it backward. Afghanistan remains a country where individuals count for more than institutions.

We need to change the structure of power. The current structure encourages ethno-linguistic confrontation and this weakens us nationally. We need a process of transition towards a parliamentary system. From the outset, we can transfer some of the presidential powers to the parliament and other organs. This will enable the government to retain the support of the population. I am not talking about a federal system. But, at least the people of each province should be able to choose their own wali.

Think of Kandahar. The economic situation does not permit all decisions to be taken by direct election. But there are ways of allowing participation in a decision. So the people of Kandahar can call a consultative assembly to choose, say, five acceptable candidates to send to the

president. Their candidates may include people from Kandahar or from elsewhere. When the president picks one of these people as wali, he can count on the support of the people of Kandahar who have proposed the wali.

In the meantime, until we reach the stage of a fully fledged parliamentary system, we should at least have a prime minister heading the executive branch. We do not need to repeat the failed experiment of having a 'chief executive'. This was set up to fail. Rather, we should have a prime minister heading the executive branch, a speaker of the parliament heading the legislative branch and a chief justice heading up the judicial branch. Then the president can be the overall leader, bringing these three branches together within a balanced system.

We had a bitter experience of the current system during the Karzai period, when I was the speaker of the parliament. Because we did not have a prime minister, whenever there was a confrontation between the legislature and the executive, it was the president who represented the executive and found himself in confrontation with parliament, even being defeated by parliament on various issues.

It would have been better if we had had someone else – a prime minister to represent the executive. That prime minister would then have been answerable both to the parliament and to the president. If we had had that structure I am confident that it would have resulted in a government more inclined to deliver necessary services and security to the Afghan people.

Therefore I believe that we should transition towards a parliamentary system, with the parties put in place. Even if the same position remains nominally presidential, there should be a prime minister as the second person in power, with a defined allocation of power between the president and the prime minister. This will ensure accountability and will reinforce our national unity and solidarity.