

On war, peace and transition

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar is the leader of the Hezb-i Islami political party and former mujahidin armed group. He was prime minister during the 1990s before the Taliban takeover of Kabul. After the Taliban's fall in 2001 he was involved in an armed campaign against the Afghanistan government and the international coalition. He signed a peace deal with the Afghanistan government in 2016 enabling his return to Afghanistan after almost 20 years in exile.

The interview was conducted by Zahid ur Rehman, who has Masters degrees in Political Science from Peshawar University and in Peace and Conflict Studies from the National Defence University, Islamabad, Pakistan. He is conducting post-graduate research on the wartime experience of Afghan nomad tribes.

ABSTRACT

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar describes some of his perspectives on war, peace and political transition in Afghanistan, drawn from a conversation with *Accord* in April 2018.

Mr Hekmatyar states that the lack of official Taliban endorsement of peace negotiations obscures the reality that a majority within the movement want to see an end to the war. Meanwhile, a ceasefire is not possible

unless it is preceded by a peace agreement. Power-sharing in Afghanistan has failed because the groups involved accept neither each other nor the concept of power-sharing per se. Different 'islands of power' have consequently emerged at district, provincial and ministerial level which disregard central government. Forthcoming elections present an opportunity to advance government reform.

The factors which have driven the conflict in Afghanistan and which can bring about peace are equally clear. The war was forced on us by the Russians. They bequeathed it to NATO, which has propped up the same forces that the Soviets relied on. The war will end when foreign interference ceases and Afghans are given a chance to find an Afghan solution to their problems. No imposed solution will work in Afghanistan and peace cannot come about through an externally driven strategy. My plan is that negotiations should take place between Afghans without any international mediation.

We shall have to accept some facts about ourselves. Some groups during their period in power have entrenched themselves in the districts and provinces, even in the capital and the ministries. These groups are determined to use government resources – tanks, cannons and aeroplanes – to protect their positions against their political rivals and other ethnicities.

The successive stages of the war have turned Afghanistan into a country of refugees. Around eight million of our people currently live in Pakistan, Iran and other countries. Some of our people have been able to return, particularly

to the south and the east. But refugees have not been able to return to northern Afghanistan.

Over time, there has been a shift in the balance of the population in the north because people have been forced to migrate from there to the south, to Herat, Kandahar, Kabul, Nangarhar and other provinces. The war will continue as long as this situation prevails. Indeed, it has potential to get even worse. If all these people who have been driven off their land start to take revenge, they can easily become a force.

These refugees should be allowed to return to their home areas and establish zones of peace there. These areas should be demilitarised, with no presence for government, opposition or foreign forces. The leaders of the armed opposition should then be allowed to return to these areas along with their families and live with security. These leaders do not feel secure staying in either Iran or Pakistan. And the opposition should be allowed to establish an office in Kabul. This is how peace can come to Afghanistan, if the foreigners allow the Afghans to get on with solving the problem.

Parties' propensity for a ceasefire and a peace process

The armed opposition includes two types of group. The first type is those who have been forced to take up arms by rivals who have abused government power to oppress them and obliged them to defend themselves. Dealing with this first group is relatively straightforward as long as the government adopts an inclusive approach and is prepared to listen to facts. It should be prepared to treat the Taliban in the peace zone with respect and guarantee the security of their life and property.

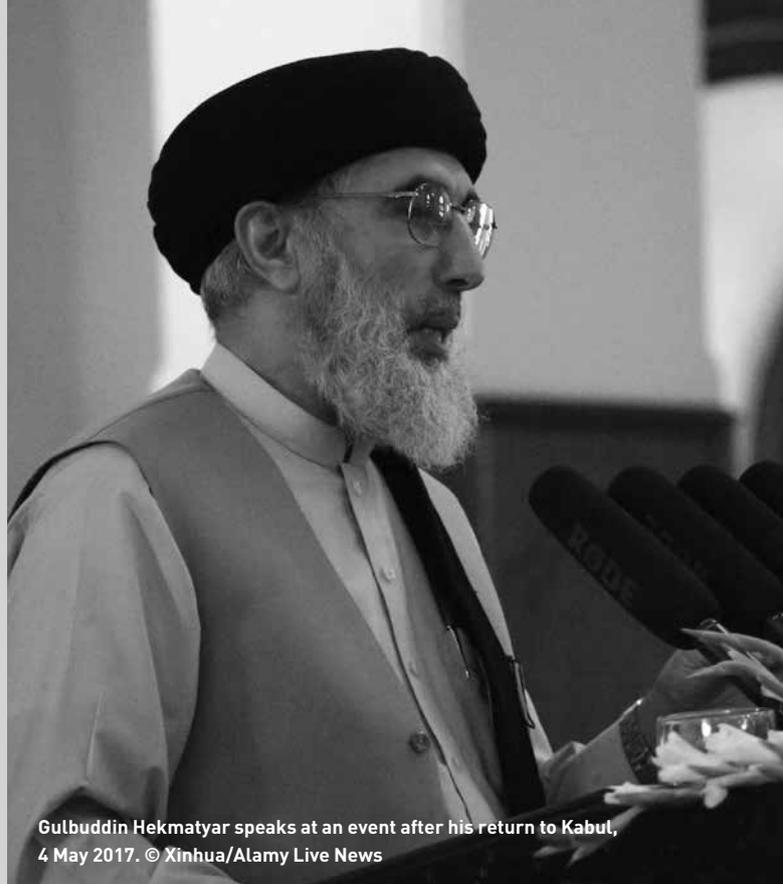
The second group within the armed opposition is those men who have become professional fighters, who have been employed from outside and who perceive their own benefit in the continuation of the war. It is more difficult to convince these men. However, I am confident that with a solution to the problems of the first group it will become much easier to deal with the professional fighters.

So far we have seen no official indication from the Taliban that they endorse the idea of negotiations or peace. There has been nothing of the sort from their office in Qatar. However, the reality is that a majority within the Taliban want to see an end to the war. If only a way can be found to bring them into the country I am confident that they will embrace the peace process.

The government has changed its position and has outlined its new proposals for peace both in the Kabul Process and the Tashkent conference. The foreigners have also started to talk about these issues and have given indications that they may be ready to accept the start of intra-Afghan negotiations. But the Taliban want to negotiate with the Americans.

The Taliban ought to have taken the position that the foreigners should cut their interference both in politics and in the war. They should have insisted that negotiations among Afghans go ahead without foreign interference. Instead they continue to insist that they will not negotiate with the government and insist on negotiating with the Americans.

It is impossible to move to a ceasefire without it being preceded by a peace agreement. Therefore, what is needed is a general plan for peace, which can be negotiated. When agreement is reached on this general plan, which can include a ceasefire as part of the over-all package, then we can proceed to ceasefire implementation. Without such agreement having been reached, it is unrealistic to expect either the Taliban or the government to jump directly to a ceasefire. On the other hand, once we have agreement through negotiations on a general peace deal, then it will be possible to move to a ceasefire.



Gulbuddin Hekmatyar speaks at an event after his return to Kabul, 4 May 2017. © Xinhua/Alamy Live News

The first necessity is to create appropriate conditions for all the parties involved in the government and the armed opposition to come together under one roof, evaluate the Afghan situation with patience and start negotiations. I have tried. I came to Kabul in the hope that I would be able to gather all parties, including those of the right and the left, *mujahidin* and non-*mujahidin*, and those who had a greater or lesser role in the war of the past 40 years. Regrettably only a few parties accepted my plan and I had no reply at all from those aligned with foreigners.

I have now convinced a few of the parties that we should have a joint sitting. I hope that even if we cannot reach agreement on the overriding national issues, we should be able to agree on ensuring that the forthcoming elections are held transparently and on time, so that we can finally put in place an effective parliament. I hope that we shall also agree that such elections must be the only way to achieve power. We must agree that from now on it is unacceptable to use force, whether through a coup d'état, rebellion, tanks and fighter planes, or foreign backers. We must enter into an accepted covenant with the nation and people. This is what I am working on for now.

Political reforms needed for permanent peace

This government has failed because it is based on the idea of sharing power, but sharing power between groups which accept neither each other nor the concept of power-sharing. Therefore, different islands of power have emerged at district, provincial and ministerial level which do not obey the rest of the government. Instead each belongs to its own party.

Ministers lose a vote of confidence, but there is no one to remove them from their jobs. Provincial governors defy the central government but the government cannot remove them for fear of provoking a revolt. It is the same for the customs and borders. The customs are controlled by the same group of people and the government is not able to gain control of the border so as to centralise the revenue under government control.

We should turn the forthcoming elections into an opportunity to achieve the necessary reforms in the government. I am confident that if we can hold free and transparent elections, we shall elect a strong parliament which will be capable of bringing appropriate reform in the government and in the system itself and in bringing about peace.

Afghanistan has its own capabilities and peculiarities. Afghanistan requires a strong central government. We are different from other countries in many respects. We lack a strong army and a stable system of government, in the absence of which either a federal system or a parliamentary system would have many adverse consequences – ultimately risking the partition of the country and insecurity. We require a powerful president who is elected and who is supported by a majority of the nation. We also require a powerful political party as no individual can really govern a country like Afghanistan. In Afghanistan authority is very important. You saw what happened in the last elections. One side accepted the results and the other did not. But there was no authority powerful enough to announce and enforce those results. We knew who had won because they had received the majority of votes. But instead, US Secretary of State John Kerry divided the government between the two sides.

It is dangerous for the management of the country's affairs to be in the hands of a few people. But in parliament we have 250 members. Buying them, even at a low price, is not particularly difficult. Just imagine the prospect of them taking important decisions, like a security cooperation treaty or even the selection of a president. If you have a rich enemy, you are essentially giving them control of the fate of the country because they can buy the 250 MPs. It would be particularly dangerous to hand over something like the selection of the president to people who can be bought like this.

Taliban governance

The Taliban have declared that they want a system based on *shuras* [elected councils]. The problem with such *shuras* is that anyone can convene them anywhere and choose their *Amir ul Momineen* ('leader of the faithful'). Historical experience shows that authoritarian leaders favour such *shuras*. This has been a recurrent theme in our history, where

a ruler gathers his hand-picked men, labels them as a *Loya Jirga* and gets them to make whatever decision he wants.

The Afghan people have never decided to hold a *Loya Jirga* and have never managed to use one to elect a popular leader. People referring to the *Loya Jirga* which elected Ahmad Shah Durrani should look at the context. Ahmad Shah baba was an officer in the imperial army of Nader Shah. After Nader Shah was killed, Ahmad Shah used a large force to capture Kandahar by coercion. It was only after he was in military control of Kandahar that he sensed the need for legitimacy and then organised a *Loya Jirga* to validate his coronation. Zahir Shah, Daud Khan, Babrak Karmal, Najib Habibullah and Ustad Rabbani all filled *Jirgas* with supporters. The rulers were able to manipulate these gatherings to obtain any decision they wanted. It did not even cost much to buy the members of these *Jirgas*. A turban usually sufficed.

Not one of the four rightly guided Caliphs was chosen behind closed doors. On the contrary, every one of them was chosen in a meeting out in the open. This is why I insist that even mentioning a *Loya Jirga* or a Taliban-style *shura* of the righteous has no basis in the *shari'a*. This idea of the *shura* of the righteous was commonly used in the time of the Abbasid Caliphate. It had no occurrence in the early years of Islam, before that. The idea of the *shura* of the righteous was simply invented by the powerful for their own ends. All the Muslims of a country should be involved in electing its president.

Addressing the war economy

Regrettably it is true that a number of Afghans have benefitted from the war to build luxurious palaces, enjoy the good life, grab and accumulate assets in banks at home and abroad, and exercise unimaginable power. Their number is not that large. Over the past few years in the order of two million *jeribs* [half acres] of government and private land have been grabbed by these power-brokers.

People who before the start of the war had a salary of Afs. 2,000 (USD \$30) now have accumulated \$2 billion of assets. A whole class of conflict entrepreneurs has been imposed on Afghans as rulers. They have acquired their wealth by grabbing land, looting banks and the money market, even kidnapping businessmen for ransom. These people want to see the war continue and are happy to sabotage any effort for peace. Even today foreign forces support these people, although they are well aware of what the power-brokers have gained from the war. The American generals also profit from the war.

The domestic and foreign thieves cooperate closely. These people fear that an end to the war would mean

financial loss and lead to them being brought to court. The nation wants exactly that, and I agree. Illegally grabbed assets should be taken back as a lesson for others. If we manage to end the war these people cannot stay on in the country as they have many enemies. They only stay for the moment because they are protected by the foreigners' planes. If it is decided that the foreign forces are leaving you will see that these people flee even faster than the foreigners.

Foreign forces

The Taliban's first demand is that they should be able to negotiate with the Americans directly. Their second demand is that the Americans should restore the same Taliban government which they previously toppled. It is far less clear what the Taliban's current position with regard to the withdrawal of foreign troops.

Conducting propaganda about troop withdrawal is one thing but dealings behind the scenes are entirely different. We do not know what the real position of the Taliban is on troop withdrawal. My advice to the Taliban would be to get into negotiations and demand an appropriate timetable for withdrawal. This is the approach which I followed in Hizb-i Islami's negotiations with the government. I demanded that there be a sensible and transparent withdrawal timetable. This is recorded in our agreement.

With regard to the Taliban's demand for restoration of their government, I advise them that it is far more important for

them to convince the Afghan people that they are interested in peace rather than insisting on the restoration of a long-toppled government.

International support for a ceasefire and permanent peace

The unfortunate truth is that many countries have transferred their political and military rivalries to Afghanistan. There are several national intelligence agencies backing up the warring parties. My request to those countries is that they should not bring their rivalries to Afghanistan. This applies to India and Pakistan, to Iran and the Arab countries and to Russia and the Americans.

The Americans did not have any rival for their mission in Afghanistan until about 2013. Initially the Pakistanis, Russians and Iranians all refrained from opposition and even cooperated in various ways. NATO logistics passed through Pakistan and Russia. Even Iran, which for years had referred to US as Great Satan, cooperated practically with the Americans in Afghanistan. Initially when the Americans intervened, the Iranians ordered the Shia parties to cooperate, ejecting them from Iran and closing their offices. But now Iran, Russia, China and even Pakistan have joined the front competing with the US. This has rendered the situation in Afghanistan far more complex than it was before. Let us see whether the opposition front manages to take their rivalry somewhere else and let Afghans get on with solving their problems.