

# President Najibullah and the National Reconciliation Policy

## Objectives, operations and obstacles

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### ABSTRACT

**What lessons can be learned from the Afghan National Reconciliation Policy (NRP) in the 1980s and 90s – about how to negotiate with armed groups, and how to balance local, national and international interests to sustain focus on building an inclusive political settlement?**

President Najibullah's government launched the NRP in the mid-1980s as the Soviet Union was looking to draw down its presence in Afghanistan. The NRP sought to negotiate an end to conflict with the *mujahidin* and to establish terms for a comprehensive political settlement. It combined traditional Afghan socio-political practices for consultation and decision-making with a pragmatic political strategy designed to build both domestic support and international legitimacy.

The NRP had a multilayered approach to negotiating with opposition groups. Dialogue looked to establish local non-aggression or peace protocol pacts. These would be discussed at district level, and then village and tribal elders would be brought in to facilitate implementation. Talks took place directly and through the United Nations.

The biggest obstacle faced by the NPC was time. As the Cold War wound down, Afghanistan's reliance on external assistance meant that the collapse of geopolitical strategic interest to support the Afghan government's NRP programme fatally undermined its chances of success. Today Kabul has international support – although this is dwindling. But it lacks the internal political will to take a reconciliation process forward.

The National Reconciliation Policy (NRP) of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) government sought, among other things, to negotiate an end to the civil war with *mujahidin* armed groups. It was developed at a pivotal moment of the Cold War in the mid-1980s when the demise of the Soviet Union was already looming. As the *mujahidin* threatened the stability of the Soviet-backed government in Kabul, President Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* reforms meant that the presence of Soviet troops in Afghanistan was increasingly being questioned in Moscow. And this in turn encouraged pro-independence PDPA members to become more vocal.

The socio-political circumstances in Afghanistan around the end of the Cold War and today are very different. By 1986, Afghanistan had endured seven years of violence, framed by proxy war between the two superpowers. Contemporary Afghanistan has been traumatised by four decades of fighting and the number of stakeholders has multiplied. The country's socio-economic and political structures have been ravaged, gender-based violence and discrimination has worsened and levels of education and healthcare have declined drastically. Party politics have been superseded by tribal or ethnic politics, and since 2002 the Afghan government has had to rebuild its military institutions from scratch.

Some parallels between the period around the end of the Cold War and today can be drawn, however. As then, the Afghan government today is standing on shaky ground, challenged every day by armed opposition groups, many of which still operate as proxies. The country is still not economically self-sufficient and remains reliant on external assistance, with insecurity the main driver of economic regression. Notwithstanding the differences between the two eras, the experiences of the NRP can shed light on some of the modalities of pursuing reconciliation today.

### **National Reconciliation Policy: objectives and methods**

The NRP had its roots in traditional Afghan socio-cultural practices such as *tiga* (putting down a stone to mark the end of the conflict and a deposit to guarantee the next steps are negotiated), *nanawati* (seeking shelter – even if your enemy comes to your home, you host them), and *Loya Jirga* (a council with a participatory structure where people get together to resolve contentious issues and reach decisions of importance). But its policy framework was a well-thought-out, modern political strategy with clear objectives. These included:

- » the withdrawal of soviet troops
- » an end to conflict with the *mujahidin*, who could then take part in political processes in order to facilitate multi-party democracy – when the PDPA came to

power in 1978 it had refused participation of other political parties

- » developing a renewed constitutional basis for the government, to gain domestic support and international legitimacy.

In 1986, the PDPA leadership changed and Najibullah was appointed head of the party. The party initiated a consultative process to define the NRP and the terms of its implementation before it was endorsed in a *Loya Jirga* in 1987. The *Loya Jirga* introduced a number of changes. These included constitutional reform, whereby the country reverted back to its pre-1978 name (Republic of Afghanistan) prior to the PDPA takeover; Islam being cited as the national religion, although the country also sought to maintain its secular values; the PDPA changing its name to the *Watan* Party to try to open up membership to 'non-hizbis' (non-PDPA members); and efforts being made to try to separate the party from the government – which was driven by the administration's desire to stop being referred to as a 'regime' by the international community.

Ahead of the 1987 *Loya Jirga*, the government launched a consultation process both within the party and with selected representatives of the Afghan people, which was intended to develop a shared definition of reconciliation and to flesh out some of the detail of NRP implementation. Deliberations went on for more than a year. PDPA cadres engaged in internal debate on priorities for reform, while village elders, tribal leaders and communities in government-controlled areas were consulted on their demands and preferences.

The party leadership made the NRP its core strategy, bringing influential Afghans from outside the party into government positions and creating a National Reconciliation Commission (NRC). The NRC was a serious effort by the government to demonstrate its intent to implement the NRP. Its independence was key to its legitimacy. NRC Chair Abdul Rahim Hatif had been a non-PDPA member of the *Ulushi Jirga* (House of Representatives) for Kandahar City during the reign of King Zahir Shah (1933–73). NRC district-level leaders were selected locally and were non-PDPA. Nor were they affiliated with the *mujahidin* but were intended to be neutral. The government sought out influential individuals with broad local approval – although as the NRP progressed and deals were made with local *mujahidin* commanders, so the process became increasingly permeated by official security personnel.

The main tasks of the Commission included the following:

- » to build trust and demonstrate that the government was inclusive and committed to the national reconciliation process, and that the NRC was independent

- » offering specific posts in government to the opposition as well as allowing opposition groups to exercise their political rights within the country
- » discussing possibilities for a coalition government with the opposition
- » announcing a unilateral ceasefire.

NRP efforts to end the conflict also engaged with UN initiatives. These included UN-led diplomacy mandated by the Security Council to mediate between different external stakeholders – regional countries, the Soviet Union and the United States. These occurred within the framework of the objectives of the 1988 Geneva Accords to oversee Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. The NRP also connected with efforts of UN agencies to facilitate the voluntary return of refugees, and with the UN Secretary-General's 1991 Five-Point Peace Plan (UN 5PPP), which was intended to serve as the basis for a comprehensive political settlement in Afghanistan. The UN 5PPP evolved after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and amid informal discussions with the UN over the viability of an interim government followed by free elections. President Najibullah had also explored whether the UN could deploy peacekeeping forces to avoid a power vacuum and related violence, but it was felt that the Security Council would not back this. Finally, the NRP included President Najibullah's offer to resign – as demanded by the opposition and suggested by the UN in order to implement the UN 5PPP and to clear a path for a democratic electoral process.

## Negotiations

The NRP had a multilayered approach to negotiating with the opposition. Within Afghanistan, the effectiveness of the government apparatus was key in negotiating with local commanders and fighters. Talks were aimed at establishing non-aggression or peace protocol pacts with the government. The conditions of the pacts would then be discussed with the NRC at district level. At this point, village and tribal elders would be involved to support local fighters' integration back into the community, giving consent to local commanders to take charge of the security of their communities where requested and supporting ex-fighters to find alternative livelihoods.

The government approached opposition leaders both directly and through the UN. Political negotiations with opposition leaders based in Pakistan or Iran took place clandestinely in third countries. These were undertaken by the government independently through its own network and not through the UN. By contrast, the Afghan government pursued regional and international dialogue with countries involved in the Afghan conflict rigorously through the UN. Such negotiations had led to the Geneva Accords and the UN 5PPP.

Objectives for the negotiations leading to the Geneva Accords were determined by the superpowers, which were guarantors of the agreement. They were focused exclusively on facilitating the withdrawal of Soviet troops with international legal approval and political endorsement. The Geneva Accords did not put in place an internationally binding framework for a long-term political solution in Afghanistan. Once the Soviet Union withdrew, both Afghanistan and Pakistan reported breach of the agreement to the UN but the guarantors were no longer focused on Af-Pak issues. This led the Secretary-General to propose the UN 5PPP, to engage regional states that had not been involved in the Geneva process and to expand the terms of the dialogue to include modalities for a political settlement.

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By 1991, however, the world had witnessed fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the Soviet bloc. As a result, for the US as the only remaining superpower and its allies on the Security Council the success of the UN 5PPP was no longer relevant. Rather, the priority was to change the communist regime in Kabul. At the time, the Afghan government was making progress with negotiations domestically through the NRP. But it was unable to gain international support for the domestic momentum it had built up, and the internal process remained vulnerable to the conflicting interests of the external players that were active in the Afghan conflict.

There were two parallel processes at the onset of the UN 5PPP: one overt, comprising the UN's efforts to find a political solution in Afghanistan; and one covert, comprising national intelligence agencies involved in pursuing their interests and making deals behind the scenes. These clandestine negotiations effectively provided a back channel for the conflicting interests of different stakeholders to undermine the Afghan peace process. This reflects Barnett Rubin's observation in his book *The Search for Peace in Afghanistan*, that the inability to find a durable solution in Afghanistan is as much a failure of the international system as of the Afghan state. The former Head of National Directorate of Security in Afghanistan (2004–10), Amrullah Saleh, confirmed in an interview with the author that understanding how to build regional and global consensus is the missing piece that Afghans have been searching for to achieve sustainable peace.

President Najibullah stressed in a letter to his family in 1995 the importance of reaching a common denominator among all stakeholders to the Afghan conflict in order to end violence:

*Afghanistan has multiple governments now, each created by different regional powers. Even Kabul is divided into little kingdoms ... unless and until all the actors [regional and global powers] agree to sit at one table, leave their differences aside to reach a genuine consensus on non-interference in Afghanistan and abide to their agreement, the conflict will go on.*

## Obstacles

Some of the main obstacles to the realisation of the NRP stemmed from mistrust of the intentions of Najibullah and his government by both the public and key regional and global 'spoilers'. For example, his previous position as head of the Afghan intelligence agency (KHAD) and his membership of PDPA more broadly was constantly manipulated in Cold War propaganda. The withdrawal of Soviet troops was the focus of superpower bargaining over Afghanistan, rather than a political solution to the Afghan crisis. Neighbouring countries questioned the legitimacy of the Afghan government or its potential to survive the withdrawal of the Soviet troops. There was also direct hostility after the Soviet withdrawal, for example in 1989 when *mujahidin* factions based in Peshawar backed by the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) attacked Jalalabad in a bid to see faction leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar installed as leader of Afghanistan. Najibullah's refusal to grant amnesty to Soviets accused of war crimes turned a page in Kabul's relations with Moscow (the 'Afghan-Soviet Friendship').

Negotiations were more difficult with opposition leaders who were resident in foreign countries such as Pakistan, Iran and Italy. For example, King Zahir Shah was dissuaded from coming to Afghanistan despite very constructive negotiations under the Rome process – perhaps the most prominent of a number of independent peace efforts that were initiated by Afghans in exile, funded by the Italian government with indirect support from the US. Moderate, pro-reconciliation *mujahidin* factions in Pakistan were threatened by Islamabad with expulsion. The Afghan government sought to respond through transparency, communicating to the Afghan people its position in terms of implementing the NRP and what kind of obstacles it was facing.

But the biggest hurdle was time. The Najibullah government did not have luxury of the years that peace and reconciliation processes necessarily take, as it faced advancing isolation by its international partners combined with increasing economic difficulties. The Afghan



Logo of the Afghan National Reconciliation Policy. © Heela Najibullah

government then, as now, was constantly firefighting crises at the expense of realising its long-term vision for reconciliation and social change. Particularly vulnerable to the compressed timeframe were the government's ambitions to engage communities in the NRP.

A key lesson of NRP is that the local and national process must be linked to each other, and both levels need to be connected to external partners. For example, few representatives of communities or civil society from inside Afghanistan had opportunities to advocate their interests to external stakeholders. Instead, externally backed political opposition groups were able to consistently assert their demands through their foreign patrons – such as Germany promoting Sibghatullah Mojaddedi and his faction, Pakistan promoting Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and Saudi Arabia Abdul Rasul Sayyaf.

## Conclusion: prospects for reconciliation and social healing

Reconciliation is a highly political term in Afghanistan. It is viewed as top-down, initiated by the Afghan government, as was the case both in 1986, and in 2010 when President Karzai called a 'National Consultative Peace Jirga', reaching out to 'upset brothers' within the Taliban, who in fact declined the invitation to attend. A 'middle-out' approach to reconciliation can be more effective and can be achieved when government leaders are prepared to engage sincerely and strategically in a peace and reconciliation process that acknowledges socio-cultural, socio-economic and political factors.

Remembering again my father's quote that Kabul is divided into little kingdoms, the question arises whether political class in Afghanistan is sufficiently mature to place national interest above access to power and money. Lessons from the 1980s and 1990s suggest that a key constituent of the political class at that time was genuine in its intention to find a political solution to the challenges Afghans faced and were not mere proxies of others. This is why today political figures such as Najibullah are remembered more respectfully because he and other members of his party were true to the stated ambitions of the NRP. They tried against the odds to find a political solution for Afghanistan

within an agreed international framework and supported by the UN, and there was a serious effort to make the NRP inclusive, consultative and focused on people.

A peace process in Afghanistan today needs to balance efforts to build internal and external consensus. This requires international partners to support internal processes that can look beyond elites to engage communities in dialogue, transitional justice and truth seeking. In the 1980s, the Afghan government's economic dependence on the Soviet Union compromised the peace process. In the 1990s, neither post-Soviet Russia nor the US were interested in helping to find a political solution in Afghanistan – despite proclamations to the contrary, as well as Moscow installing the Rabbani government and providing support to some political parties. This was exemplified by Russia pushing to replace Najibullah ahead of the UN 5-PPP implementation. Afghanistan's fledgling democracy is still heavily reliant on aid, and so Kabul's capacity to sustain peace and reconciliation is similarly reliant on external support.

What worked in the NRP of 1980s was the fact that the process was transparent and sincere, with clear vision, objectives and mechanisms. Political will existed internally that allowed the *Watan* Party leadership to pursue peace in the aftermath of the Cold War and amid international isolation. However, the collapse of geopolitical strategic interest in Afghanistan also fatally undermined the NRP's chances of success. Today, the situation is almost reversed. The current Afghan government has the international political and financial interest and investment to be able to pursue peace, at least in principle. But it lacks the internal political will, strategy and understanding of reconciliation to take a process forward. The primary void compromising progress towards a viable reconciliation process lies in the lack of commitment of the national leadership and its lack of understanding of what reconciliation might entail, despite the fact that the current Afghan circumstances indicate the urgent need for change.