



Karzai-Hekmatyar talks: Why now?

Abdulahdi Hairan¹

1st June 2010

On 21st March 2010, the spokesmen for both the Afghan government and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami (HIA) militant group confirmed that a delegation from Hizb had been sent to assume peace talks with President Karzai.² The delegation was led by Qutbuddin Hilal, a close aide to Hekmatyar, and included Daud Abidi, Amin Karim, Qarib-ur-Rahman Saeed, and Hekmatyar's son-in-law Dr. Ghairat Baheer. While in Kabul, the delegation met many Afghan and foreign officials and presented their 15-point peace plan which reportedly included the withdrawal of foreign troops in the following six months, starting from July 2010. On April 2nd, the delegation reported that the first phase of the talks had been concluded, though no progress on the plan was reported.³

As expected, the news break received mixed reaction from around the country. Labeled a warlord himself, Hekmatyar, has been involved in multiple conflicts and atrocities in Afghanistan and is accused of war crimes for his role in the Afghan civil war. He received the biggest share of international aid that poured into Afghanistan during the anti-Soviet jihad period and was accused for target killings of his opponents. Hekmatyar's group was the only party that fought against the Soviets and every other jihadi party in Afghanistan as well such as, Rabbani's Jamiat-e-Islami, Mazari's Hizb-e-Wahdat, Dostum's Junbash-e-Milli, and the Taliban. Interestingly, Hekmatyar's party remained at odds with the Taliban regime despite having similar views on the implementation of a strict form of Sharia law in the country. When the

¹ Abdulhadi Hairan is a Senior Research Analyst at CAPS

² BBC- Afghan Hizb-e-Islami militants hold peace talks in Kabul- March 22, 2010

³ Pajhwok- First phase of HIA peace talks ends- April 02, 2010

course of events abruptly changed after September 11, 2001, a faction of Hizb-e-Islami joined the Karzai-led government, while Gulbuddin joined the insurgency. Now HIA is the third important insurgent group following the Taliban and the Haqqani network. HIA works independently but is a close ally of the Taliban.

Having said that, if the course of events is closely studied one can easily conclude that Hekmatyar and his HIA have always tried to attain power in Afghanistan and continue to pursue their political aspirations. For the attainment of power many have deemed that Hekmatyar will compromise on anything. This notion distances Hekmatyar from the Taliban and other insurgent groups, who fight primarily for their ideologies and are unlikely to compromise them for the mere attainment of power.

Why is Hekmatyar engaging in peace talks now?

Since 2005, President Karzai has rallied the idea of dialogue with all insurgent groups. In the current security climate, Hekmatyar's decision to participate in peace talks has more to do with his strong bargaining position than seeking peace and stability in Afghanistan. This critical juncture sees a growing insurgency, a weakening Afghan government and a desperate international community; the latter of the three firmly cornered. Various members of Hezb are already working in various prominent positions in government offices as Ministers, Governors, Members of Parliament and the Senate. For instance, the Minister of Education, Farooq Wardak, the Governor of Paktika province, Juma Khan Hamdard have publicly asserted their allegiance and loyalty to their leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.⁴ This denotes that Hekmatyar has had a strong presence in the government till date, and it seems he had waited for a change in the political paradigm of the country to make his presence felt even more.

In December 2009, President Obama announced a troop surge for Afghanistan following an exit strategy staged for the summer of 2011, while acknowledging that the insurgency is stronger in 2010 than previous years. To facilitate the exit strategy, the international community has tried to balance both its interests and the Afghan governments, by supporting the reconciliation and reintegration process. The International Conference on Afghanistan held in London primarily

⁴ Afghanistanvotes.com- Hekmatyar's peace plan: Change in strategy?- April 06, 2010

focused on this issue and was successful in appealing at least to HIA. Hekmatyar's relative support for the peace plan could in fact be interpreted as a plan to attain power before any other group comes forward. President Karzai's response was welcoming as he appointed a very important former HIA member, Abdul Hadi Arghandiwal, as the Minister of Finance. And the latest and most important development in this process was the dispatch of a HIA delegation to Kabul by Hekmatyar.

How important is HIA as an insurgent group?

Now the important question still remains unanswered. How sustainable was the peace talks? The experts who categorize the current Afghan insurgency believe that HIA is the third important insurgent group (after the Taliban and the Haqqani Network), but they also warn that their joining the government may not change or improve the situation. Since the main violent groups, the Taliban and the Haqqani Network are still weary of the reconciliation plan proposed by Karzai and supported by the Afghan people.

Another important aspect of this was the different approach adopted by Pakistan regarding Karzai's reconciliation plan and Hekmatyar's peace talks. The Taliban had held secret talks with the Afghan government and the United Nations since the summer of 2009, and Pakistan was aware of these talks. Yet, they used this opportunity to express their strong resentment of the peace process by halting the peace talks by capturing a number of high level members of the Quetta Shura, including the most important commander of the insurgency, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. It is now pretty clear that this step was taken, because Pakistan wanted a central role in Afghanistan and did not want the Taliban to hold peace talks bypassing Pakistan and its intelligence agency, the ISI. But there was no such reaction when Hekmatyar sent a high level delegation to Kabul for peace talks. Many members of the delegation are based in Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, but there was no crackdown on them, like the ones against the Taliban.

This clearly means that Pakistan was not happy with the Taliban-Karzai peace talks but is indifferent to the Hekmatyar-Karzai peace. The question is why this different approach to the same issue? The answer can be found in Pakistan's long time close and strong relations with



Hekmatyar's HIA. Hekmatyar was Pakistan's favorite jihadi commander during the anti-Soviet jihad and the civil war that preceded it. In the current juncture, Pakistan may see him as a potential strategic partner in Afghanistan and that could have underpinned their lack of response against the meeting held between HIA and the Afghan government. While, Pakistan viewed the Taliban as a strategic partner as well the Afghan government was well aware of this, thus causing the Afghan government to circumvent Pakistan's role in the reconciliation process. This instigated Pakistan to castigate the Afghan government's communication with the Taliban.

The HIA demands

But in practice, it seems unlikely for this plan to work. Having said that the HIA is the weakest group among the insurgency, its demands are the same as of the two other stronger insurgent groups – the Taliban and the Haqqani Network. The demands include the withdrawal of foreign troops and formation of a transitional government, the former unacceptable to the international community and the latter to President Karzai.⁵ Secondly, there are demands to bring certain changes to the Afghan Constitution which would not be acceptable to anyone.

The risk factor

If HIA were to be included into the Afghan government this could pose a potential risk to the peace talks with the Taliban. It is true that Hekmatyar is now an informal ally of the Taliban in the fight against the international forces, but they were once enemies initially until the Taliban regime was overthrown in 2001. If the Taliban join the peace talks with the Karzai government, they may dislike the idea of having Hekmatyar as an equal partner. If those circumstance come about the Afghan government may prefer the Taliban over the HIA, but this will result in turning Hekmatyar and Pakistan against the Afghan government. In simple words, the fight is for power. Hekmatyar is not only known for his loyalty to Pakistan and his brutal role in the civil war period, but he also known to be capricious. His erratic personality has had him shift allies in the

⁵ AP- Afghan warlord Hekmatyar talks peace, but brings little to table- March 22, 2010

past, and this can happen any time in the future as well. And both President Karzai and the Taliban understand this historical fact.

International and local concerns

There is local concern about the Hekmatyar-Karzai peace talks and its prospects for the future. Questions regarding HIA's stance on women issues, human rights, civil society, and the establishment of democracy in Afghanistan are all concerns of local Afghans? In light of these issues, one can say that reconciling with HIA will be very complicated and challenging for the Afghan government. It is impossible to say for certain that these anti-government groups will not act against the current system once they become stakeholders in the government. Their future political agendas for Afghanistan are unknown, and we cannot also determine what form their relations with the neighboring countries will assume. As Pakistan is extremely hostile to the idea of Northern Alliance domination in the government, Iran holds the same aggression against Hekmatyar's government and the Central Asian countries as well as India are not pleased with the thought of the Taliban coming back to power. The overall situation in Afghanistan can be attributed to a weak government overwhelmed with corruption and an incompetent and unprofessional police force. Giving the country back to these violent groups means going back to the 1990s. The money that is being spent on reconciling with these groups encourages extremism and militancy in the region. Instead, if that money is spent on strengthening the security forces, reforming the government system, and improving the public services, it would help facilitate a sustainable solution to the conflict.