

Kosim Bekmuhammad: Kabul is mistaken thinking that that the Taliban will become part of the government

If the United States leaves Afghanistan, Central Asia could become a corridor through which radical movements will carry out hostile actions against Russia and China, said Kosim Bekmuhammad, a Tajik expert on regional issues.

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The presidential elections in Afghanistan, held in September last year, did not resolve the issue of creation of an authoritative power recognized by the majority of the population and the international community.

Three months after the election date in late December, Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan declared Ashraf Ghani the winner with 50.64% of the votes. Another candidate, Abdullah Abdullah, who garnered about 40% of the votes according to official figures, rejected the election results and also declared himself president. Majority of the other politicians who participated in the elections also did not recognize the announced results. Consequently, a kind of dual power was established in the country. Attempts at negotiations between the supporters of Ghani and Abdullah were unsuccessful.



*Negotiations between the supporters of Ashraf Ghani (pictured left) and Abdullah Abdullah (pictured right) were unsuccessful. Photo: Reuters*

The split in the power elite is taking place in light of the growing threat from the Taliban movement (prohibited in Tajikistan and several CIS countries), which continues to control a significant part of the country. On the other hand, Afghanistan still retains the “status” of refuge for terrorists and the main source of export of drugs and weapons to other countries in the region.

The length of the state border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan is more than 1400 km.

**CABAR.asia: The United States supported Ashraf Ghani in Afghanistan. However, at the end of March, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo met with Abdullah Abdullah. Why is it important for the United States to keep Ashraf Ghani in power?**

**Kosim Bekmuhammad:** The fact that most countries are not rushing to congratulate Ashraf Ghani with his victory, indirectly indicates their skepticism about the controversial results of the presidential elections in Afghanistan. This not only seriously undermines Ashraf Ghani’s reputation in the international arena, but also casts doubt on his legitimacy and leads to a crisis of diarchy.



*Kosim Bekmuhammad. Photo: CABAR.asia*

In my opinion, if the United States could predict the current situation in Afghanistan, they would not be in a hurry to support Ashraf Ghani. Apparently, in Washington, they thought that the situation is not going to be much worse than the one developed in the aftermath of the presidential elections in Afghanistan in 2014. But in the end, we have what we have.

It is now difficult to find supporters for the imaginary idea that only one particular ethnic group should lead Afghanistan. In this sense, the reaction of Dr. Abdullah to the election results is not just the reaction of a single politician and his supporters. This is the reaction of various and widespread political, social, and ethnic groups to the injustices they witnessed. At least during the last three presidential campaigns in Afghanistan. It was as a result of this reaction, that despite the personal involvement of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at the inauguration ceremony of Ashraf Ghani, Washington took a step back and demanded that the latter reach an agreement with Dr. Abdullah.

**The reaction of Dr. Abdullah to the elections results is not just the reaction of a single politician and his supporters.**

Ahead of the two inauguration ceremonies of Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah, US officials, including Mike Pompeo, as well as a number of prominent Afghan politicians, tried to convince both sides to compromise. The parties even proposed to continue the work of the government of national unity. However, Dr. Abdullah's team did not agree with the symbolic post of the head of the executive branch and called for more radical measures, such as annulment of the election results, the creation of a coalition government and the launch of the constitutional reform process.

On the other hand, Ashraf Ghani understands that, Dr. Abdullah, remaining in power, in spite of internal and external pressure, will never agree to play a symbolic role. The

presence of Dr. Abdullah as an active and widely supported leader can reduce the prominence of Ashraf Ghani.

Therefore, although the United States is betting on Ashraf Ghani, the new situation in Afghanistan is such that the interests of the other side should also be taken into account. Otherwise, the United States will face more serious challenges for its political and military presence in Afghanistan.

### **And what will happen to the plan for US peace talks with the Taliban?**

The White House saw the signing of a peace agreement with the Taliban and the results of the presidential elections in Afghanistan as an opportunity for political benefits within the United States. This was done in preparation for this year's presidential elections, in which Donald Trump wants to win. Although the United States is not particularly successful in this matter. Therefore, the Trump administration can use the situation in Afghanistan in its propagandistic interests only if it is possible to reach a new agreement between Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah.



*Mike Pompeo in Kabul. Photo: bbc.com*

President Donald Trump, dissatisfied with the lack of an agreement between Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah, hinted that the Taliban could defeat the Kabul government after the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. Whether Trump wished or not, but his words strengthened the position of the Taliban in intra-Afghan negotiations.

Under such circumstances, Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah have no choice but to reach an agreement on the establishment of a comprehensive national government, which would include representatives of political, ethnic and regional political parties and groups. Otherwise, the internal conflict in the existing political system of Afghanistan will end in favour of the Taliban.

**Is it possible, that the Taliban united with Ghani and started a war against Abdullah?**

The common ethnicity of Ashraf Ghani and the Taliban does not mean that they can be mentally and ideologically completely close. Perhaps for the Taliban, Dr. Abdullah with his anti-Soviet Mujahideen past is closer than Ashraf Ghani. Thus, the probability of an alliance between the Taliban and Ashraf Ghani seems unlikely.

It is not yet possible to predict how intra-Afghan negotiations with the Taliban will take place, but there is no doubt that they will be complex and completely confusing. Recent statements by the Taliban offset the achievements of more than 18 years of US presence in Afghanistan. Former Guantanamo prisoner Mullah Fazil, Taliban military leader and member of the US-led negotiation movement in Doha, said on March 25, that the next Afghan government would be Islamic, with a Taliban leader. On this issue, they do not accept any compromises. If Kabul thinks that the Taliban will be only part of this government, then they are mistaken. Instead, it is the current authorities of Kabul that must become part of the Taliban movement in order to be represented in power.

If diarchy continues in Kabul, then the victory of the Taliban is quite possible. Therefore, it can be assumed that Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah will have to start negotiations with the Taliban as a united team.

### **What impact will the current situation in Afghanistan have on Tajikistan's relations with this country?**

Tajikistan is neutral in a dispute between Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah. Obviously, Tajikistan, as a close neighbour of Afghanistan, advocates for the speedy resolution of this political conflict, since the preservation of this situation may lead to a weakening of the Afghan armed forces and security services, their demoralization to combat terrorism and extremism. Certainly, the negative impact of such processes on the situation on the border of Afghanistan with neighbouring countries, including Tajikistan, will be felt.

### **To what extent will the remnants of armed groups, primarily ISIS (a movement prohibited in Tajikistan and other CIS countries) and drug trafficking in a dual power state, pose a threat to Tajikistan? Are there areas along the long border of Afghanistan with Tajikistan that official Kabul does not control?**

Extremist and terrorist organizations in Afghanistan, including ISIS and Al Qaeda (prohibited movements in Tajikistan and other CIS countries), view the peace between the United States and the Taliban as a chance for survival. They are confident that the withdrawal or significant reduction of the US troops in Afghanistan will also reduce pressure on them. Because over the last years, these organizations have been the main

targets of the American drones.

After departure of the US troops, ISIS and Al-Qaeda may change their tactics and strategy in Afghanistan.

In this context, it becomes possible that the actions of these groups in recruitment and attraction of new forces and strengthening ties in the regions bordering with the Central Asian countries, including Tajikistan will intensify.

It is unclear how the Taliban are going to respond to these groups. According to their agreement with the United States, the Taliban should not allow these forces to wage an armed struggle against the United States and its allies in Afghanistan. Some experts believe that ISIS and Al-Qaeda can persuade the Taliban to be allowed to stay in Afghanistan in exchange for refusing to take hostile action against the United States. In this scenario, the actions of these movements against Russia and China will not take long. In this case, Central Asia will turn into a corridor along which these forces will exert their influence on these two countries.

In this setting, the threats of terrorism, extremism and drug smuggling will not only decrease, but also increase, which will require increased preparedness of the countries of the region, including Tajikistan.

**Of all the countries in the region, only Uzbekistan congratulated Ashraf Ghani on his election victory. Others, including Tajikistan, prefer to remain silent. Meanwhile, General Abdul Rashid Dostum and Uzbek ethnic groups in Afghanistan have basically joined Dr. Abdullah's team. Why did Uzbekistan choose this position?**

Historically, the Soviet Union mostly maintained open and hidden ties with Pashtun political figures and groups in Afghanistan. This "political tradition" is preserved today not only among the political elite of Russia, as the successor of the Soviet Union, but also in the politics of some other countries, including Uzbekistan. Although, Uzbekistan has long had ties with Abdul Rashid Dostum because of his political and military influence in Afghanistan and, of course, his ethnicity.

### **Uzbekistan's approach to Afghanistan has long-term economic goals.**

However since 2016, after Ashraf Ghani tried to get rid of Dostum and even bring his case to court, the latter was forced to flee Afghanistan and spent two years in Turkey. Many of

the influential figures from Dostum's circle were either removed from the political scene of the country, or, surrendering to the promises of Kabul, themselves moved away. In this regard, countries that previously had contacts with Dostum, including Uzbekistan, distanced themselves from him.



*Abdul Rashid Dostum at Kabul Airport after returning from Turkey: Photo Reuters*

After 2018, the protests and rallies of Dostum supporters in the north against Ghani and his return to northern Afghanistan also failed to receive the support of foreign countries, including Uzbekistan. Because any contact with him could be considered by President Ashraf Ghani as an interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan.

With the development of this process, the inclusion of Dostum in Dr. Abdullah's team made Uzbekistan even more cautious in this matter. Tashkent understands that although Dostum remains one of the most prominent political and ethnic figures in the eyes of the older generation of Afghanistan, he has already lost his previous positions.

More importantly, Uzbekistan has economic interests in Afghanistan and South Asia and shows great interest in the implementation of some projects in the field of energy and transport infrastructure, including the Mazar-i-Sharif-Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railways, TUTAP and others. If these projects are implemented, Tashkent will be able to play a leading role in the export of goods from Central Asia to South Asia.

Consequently, the approach of Uzbekistan to Afghanistan goes far beyond supporting the interests of a particular ethnic group, and pursues long-term economic goals. This is also observed in the attitude of Uzbekistan to its role as a mediator in the Afghan peace process. Although it is said that the United States imposed this role on Uzbekistan, it is obvious that Tashkent, in contacts with the Taliban, is seeking a positive attitude of this group towards the issue of realizing its own interests in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan is the only country in Central Asia that is trying to establish contacts with the Taliban.

**What do you think can be the solution to the emerging political crisis in Afghanistan? Continuation of the war, fragmentation of the territory or separation**

## **of power?**

Mike Pompeo's visit to Afghanistan in the peak of coronavirus crisis in the United States demonstrated that Washington is seriously concerned about the political confrontation between Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah.

During the negotiations, he pointed out to the need for mutual concessions and the creation of a united government. The failure in the negotiations forced him to announce the plans to reduce \$1 billion in aid to Afghanistan. At the same time, Pompeo stressed that the United States will take more drastic measures if both sides do not reach an agreement.

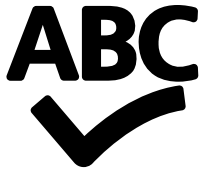
A few days ago, Ashraf Ghani proposed the chairmanship of the High Council of Peace to Dr. Abdullah, but was refused. In spite of this, Dr. Abdullah expressed his readiness to find a political solution to the current crisis in Afghanistan. It is clear that Dr. Abdullah, who considers himself the real winner of the presidential elections, does not want to hold positions dependent on Ashraf Ghani. This creates certain difficulties. Perhaps the maximum concession Dr. Abdullah is willing to make will be the 50/50 process of separation of powers, the implementation of which will be regulated by a credible document. But at the moment it seems that Ashraf Ghani is not ready to accept such an offer.

It is worth mentioning that the Afghan military and security forces are currently trying to avoid involvement in political games, but this situation will not last long. Some of these forces will inevitably be withdrawn from the neutral zone for various reasons, including political, regional or ethnic. This is a very dangerous moment, which can lay the foundation for armed conflict and crisis in the current Afghan state. That would be entirely in the interests of the Taliban. Therefore, if Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah do not reach an agreement, there is a rather high probability of an armed conflict in Afghanistan that will turn the country into a regional "outcast" and ultimately lead to the collapse of the country.

The attacks that followed the signing of a peace agreement between the United States and the Taliban show that the latter cannot be regarded as a single force. There are many Taliban who operate independently and are connected with various centres abroad. Most likely, they will not recognize the Taliban's peace agreement with other parties and will continue armed operations.



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