

AFGHANISTAN 2014: POLITICAL TRANSITION
WITHOUT DEMOCRACY?

Diego Abenante

University of Trieste
abenanted@sp.units.it

1. *Introduction*

In 2014 Afghanistan was dominated by the presidential election that led to the victory of Ashraf Ghani, after two successive terms in office by Hamid Karzai. Despite the ultimate success of the transition, the election has been marred by the same problems of fraud and ballot stuffing that characterised the previous polls. The declaration by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) of the victory of Ashraf Ghani over the former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, who won the first round, has sparked outrage from Abdullah's supporters. The result was a political impasse, which has requested two «political rescue» missions by US Secretary of State John Kerry. After a prolonged negotiation, Ghani and Abdullah signed a deal which provides for the creation of the Government of National Unity (GNU) and the position of Chief Executive Officer (CEO), to which Abdullah was appointed. Despite the difficulties, it would be wrong to underestimate the historical significance of the 2014 election. For the first time since «9/11», Kabul has been able to peacefully change its political leadership and therefore to take at least a first step towards political institutionalisation.¹ The formation of the new GNU obviously sparked a debate on whether or not the new political landscape will be

¹ Obviously, there are precedents in Afghanistan's past. The best known is that of Amir Abdur Rahman (1844-1901), who was succeeded by his son, Habibullah, after his death. Another often-quoted case is the transfer of power from President Sibghatullah Mojaddedi to the *Jamiat-i-Islami* leader Burhanuddin Rabbani in 1992; however this transition was not, in fact, peaceful, having taken place under the threat of armed intervention. 'Afghanistan's Political Transition', *International Crisis Group* (ICG), Asia Report N° 260, 16 October 2014, p. 1 (<http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/260-afghanistan-s-political-transition.pdf>). From a theoretical point of view, one of the basic requisites of a democracy lies in its capacity to minimize the costs involved in the transmission of power. Giuseppe Ieraci, 'Fallen Idols. State Failure and the Weakness of Authoritarianism', *DiSPeS Working Papers*, 3, 2013, p. 9.

able to tackle the immense problems left open by the previous administration. Issues including, among others, the reconciliation process, the corruption of the public administration, the need to revive the Afghan economy despite the inevitable reduction of the financial benefits coming from the international military force.

The other important event of the year was the end of the Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) on 28 December, which completed the planned withdrawal of the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) troops from Afghanistan. This event did not mean, however, the end of the international military presence. Immediately after his appointment, President Ghani signed two pacts – the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with the US and the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with NATO – this guarantees the continued military presence of the coalition under the new Resolute Support Mission (RSM). The agreements represent an important political signal of the US to maintain its support to the fragile Afghan State in the wake of the events in Iraq and Syria. In the meantime, a clear worsening of the situation has marked the war between the insurgency, the international coalition and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). In addition to the constant rise in the level of violence, the conflict has claimed fewer victims from the coalition forces, while those among the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) have reached a record high figure. Given the greater role of the ANSF, this is not surprising. However, most tragic has been the rise in the number of civilian casualties, which in 2014 reached its highest number since 2001. Two other important arguments discussed in this paper are the prospects of the dialogue between Kabul and the Taliban under Ghani's leadership, and the situation of Kabul's relations with Pakistan, which saw interesting developments. The essay will end with a short assessment of the state of the Afghan economy in 2014.

2. Presidential election: Background and preparation

According to the complicated schedule dictated by the Constitution, in 2014 Afghanistan was due to elect the President and the provincial councils. Of the two polls, obviously it was the first that attracted most of the observers' attention. The country faced the new presidential election with mixed feelings. From one point of view, the end of the Karzai era was seen by many independent analysts as a necessary step to tackle some of the most urgent problems left open by the previous administration. To this extent, the decision of the government to respect the Constitution and call for the election – despite the awareness of the many flaws in the electoral machinery – was welcomed by almost all parties, except for some hard-line Karzai supporters. In fact, some observers had suspected that the President could take the lack of security as a pretext for delaying elections, in order to

get some guarantees about his own future from the main candidates.² During 2013, in the south-western «Pashtun belt», there were various meetings of tribal leaders and other interest groups who expressed their fear about a possible victory of Karzai's main contender, Abdullah Abdullah, who was widely seen as the Tajiks' candidate.³ Not surprisingly, between 2013 and 2014, the US administration sent clear messages to Kabul that a failure in convening the election would mean the likely suspension of American military and financial aid.⁴ On the other hand, the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework (TMAF) of July 2013 reiterated the Afghan government's commitment to «conduct credible, inclusive and transparent Presidential and Parliamentary elections in 2014 and 2015», as a condition for the donor countries' continued support.⁵ These promises necessarily included a reform of the electoral mechanism. However, given the structural problems that have characterized almost all Afghan elections since 2001, this was not an easy task to accomplish. In particular, the 2009 presidential election that confirmed Karzai in his role had been largely marred by frauds.⁶ These problems included the absence of a voter list, the surplus of voter cards as compared to the actual number of voters, the absence of electronic IDs, and the lack of truly independent bodies of electoral monitoring. It was therefore expected that the Afghan government would take serious action to solve these problems before the 2014 election.

A partial fulfilment of this commitment had appeared to be approved by the Parliament in July 2013 with a legal framework, which was generally welcomed by the Western partners.⁷ On the basis of these new laws, the

² Kevin Sieff, 'Karzai Backers Seek Delay in Afghan vote', *The Washington Post*, 31 July 2013.

³ Dr. Abdullah is by family half-Pashtun and half-Tajik; however he is primarily supported by the northern and western communities.

⁴ Statement by Gen. J. F. Dunford, US commander in Afghanistan, *ibid.*; see also 'Readout of President Obama's telephone call with President Karzai', *The White House*, 9 April 2013 (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/04/09/readout-president-obama-s-telephone-call-president-karzai>). Other undisclosed US administration sources are referred to in 'Afghanistan's Political Transition', *ICG*, p. 4.

⁵ The TMAF is an agreement that was reached at the Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan of July 2012. According to the agreement, the foreign donor countries pledged their continued financial aid to Kabul in exchange for strong political and administrative reforms on the part of the Afghanistan government. See 'Senior Officials Meeting Joint Report', *Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework*, 3 July 2013, Kabul, p. 4. (http://mof.gov.af/Content/files/TMAF_SOM_Report_Final_English.pdf).

⁶ 'Afghanistan: Elections and the Crisis of Governance', *ICG*, Asia Briefing N° 96, Kabul/Brussels, 25 November 2009, pp. 8-15; see also Diego Abenante, 'L'Afghanistan nel 2010: la nuova *impasse* elettorale e i tentativi di riconciliazione nazionale', *Asia Maior 2010*, pp. 102-110.

⁷ Matthew Rosenberg, 'With New Law, Afghanistan Moves Closer to Elections', *The New York Times*, 17 July 2013; see also 'UNAMA Welcomes Progress on Key

2014 elections were to be the first to be held under a legal framework approved by a democratically elected body. However, the opposition, as well as some independent analysts, noted that the new electoral laws excluded the presence of international actors in the two main monitoring bodies, the IEC and the Independent Electoral Complaints' Commission (IECC). Moreover, according to some Afghan political actors, the selection mechanism for both institutions gave too much power to the President.⁸

This said, obviously few observers expected the new legal framework to solve all the problems of the Afghan elections, given that some of these problems are linked to traditional social and political dynamics. It is widely recognised that, on the part of many actors, manipulation has become an integral part of the political process.⁹ Moreover, given the absence of an efficient post-election invalidation process, the monitoring conducted by the IECC reflects more the ability of the candidates to negotiate the result rather than the reality of frauds.¹⁰ These aspects are to be placed in a wider political context dominated by the fragmentation and weakness of the political parties, and by a presidential system, which emphasises the executive powers to the highest degree, leaving only a marginal role to the parliament.¹¹ Although this system was considered by many to be ill-suited to the characteristics of Afghan polity, the choice of a strong executive had been supported by the international coalition – especially the US – and by the majority of the Pashtun community, in the aftermath of the 2001-02 military intervention. Nowadays, most of the observers agree that a democratisation of Afghanistan would necessarily imply the dilution of the President's power, the strengthening of the political parties, and the reform of the Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) system adopted for legislative elections.¹²

Election Law, Calls for Rapid Endorsement', *UNAMA News Update*, Kabul, 14 July 2013 (<http://www.unama.unmissions.org/default.aspx?ctl=Details&tabid=12254&mid=15756&ItemID=37031>).

⁸ Rafi Sediqi, 'Karzai Appoints Nine Members as Commissioners in the IEC', *Toloneews*, 31 July 2013.

⁹ Martine van Bijlert, 'Elections 2014 (54): Provincial Councils Results Creaking under the Weight of Manipulation', *Afghanistan Analysts Network* (AAN), 29 October 2014.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Thomas Ruttig, 'A Joint «Durrani» Candidate for President? After the Unity Jirga in Kabul', *AAN*, 5 March 2014.

¹² 'Election Observation Mission. Afghanistan Parliamentary Elections 2010, Final Report', *Democracy International*, June 2011, p. 46 (<http://democracyinternational.com/publications/election-observation-mission-afghanistan-2010-parliamentary-elections-report>); see also, 'Afghanistan's Parties in Transition', *ICG, Asia Briefing* N° 141, Kabul/Brussels, 26 June 2013, p. 5 (<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/b141-afghanistans-parties-in-transition.aspx>). On the defects of the SNTV system see Diego Abenante, 'L'Afghanistan: la nuova *impasse* elettorale', p. 108.

3. Electoral strategies

Before the election started, many observers focused on Hamid Karzai's strategy. The experience of the 2009 Presidential election taught analysts how great the government's power of influence was. Most observers expected that Karzai would try to create obstacles to the election of Abdullah Abdullah – his main opponent in 2009 and the strongest candidate in 2014 – and would throw his weight behind one of the Pashtun candidates. It is true that the President had, many times, been repeating that he would remain neutral. The stance obviously had earned Karzai international praise. However, there is evidence to support the view that the President's official «neutrality» concealed a more complex strategy. While the incumbent President did not openly support any candidate, his entourage has exerted much influence over the election process. This conclusion may be inferred by the many meetings that took place at the Presidential Palace, concerning the elections agenda, as well as the activism shown by Karzai's supporters in the months before the election.

From the beginning of the electoral campaign until the end of 2013, Karzai did not endorse any single candidate, while distributing his favour between Zalmay Rassoul, Abdul Rassul Sayyaf, Ashraf Ghani and his own brother Qayyum. This game, according to many analysts, was aimed at creating a fragmented political scene where Karzai could act as a political broker and retain much of his influence. This appeared logical, given that Karzai, since 2003, had benefited from the fragmentation among the opposition forces.¹³ However, this strategy appeared to change towards the end of 2013 and the early months of 2014. The reason being that the exit polls released in late December 2013 disclosed a scenario of a likely victory for Abdullah Abdullah. According to independent observers, the disclosure of the polls created «a panic» in the President's entourage.¹⁴ The President's response was to concentrate all his resources on a single Pashtun candidate, which was identified by some observers as being the former Foreign Minister Zalmay Rassoul.¹⁵ However, Karzai never officially endorsed him, and the following events suggest that until the last moment, there was considerable uncertainty in the Presidential circle as to who was the «right» candidate.

Perhaps the most interesting move was the unofficial *Jirga* (tribal assembly) convened in April 2014 by some important tribal heads and other leaders of Kandahar's Pashtun – mainly Durrani – community, in order to find a united candidate for the Presidency. Although the

¹³ William Maley, 'Afghanistan in 2011. Positioning for an Uncertain Future', *Asian Survey*, 52, 1, p. 90.

¹⁴ 'Afghanistan's Political Transition', *ICG*, p. 9.

¹⁵ 'Zalmay Rassoul: Afghanistan's Next Leader?', *Al Jazeera*, 5 October 2013.

Presidential entourage denied any involvement in convening the *Jirga*, it appeared that the President had played a major role in organizing it through his tribal and family connections. However, the fact that the *Jirga* ultimately failed in its objective was a clear indication not only of the decline of the ethnic factor in Afghan politics, but also of the President's difficulties in trying to influence the vote. In fact, the *Jirga* ended with no less than two favoured candidates: Zalmay Rassoul and Qayyum Karzai.¹⁶ The stalemate was resolved a few days later, when the pressure against the fragmentation of the pro-Karzai vote led to Qayyum's withdrawal from the election and to his declaration of support to Rassoul. The fact that, in the same days, other Pashtun heavyweights offered their support to Rassoul led many independent observers to see the move as inspired – if not altogether directed – by Hamid Karzai. However, interestingly enough, Rassoul was considered the weakest among the potential candidates. According to three pre-election polls disclosed in December 2013, the struggle was one between Abdullah and Ghani.¹⁷ This peculiar circumstance therefore, led some observers to suggest that the President had reverted to supporting a weak candidate in the hope of fragmenting the vote and playing the role of a political broker after the election.¹⁸

4. *The tone of the campaign and the first result*

The start of the campaign, from February to April 2014, was characterized by a generally optimistic feeling. This was motivated by two basic elements: the fact that for the first time the incumbent President had to leave office seemed to make the election more open than usual to surprising results; second, the President's reluctance to endorse any specific candidate contributed to giving the vote a fresher outlook. The impression was confirmed by the general tone of the campaign, which was unusually free from ethnically motivated rhetoric. The apparently low focus of the candidates on ethnic issues was quite surprising, considering that all the candidates had strategically chosen their supporters from the minority communities.¹⁹ Despite considerable differences in the situation in Kabul and in the provinces, for observers, the competition left the impression of a true change of pace.

¹⁶ Thomas Ruttig, 'A Joint «Durrani» Candidate for President?».

¹⁷ Matthew Rosenberg, 'Polling Comes to Afghanistan, Suggesting Limit to Sway of President Karzai', *The New York Times*, 28 December 2013.

¹⁸ 'Afghanistan's Political Transition', *ICG*, pp. 8-9.

¹⁹ For example, Ashraf Ghani had given the vice-presidential tickets to the veteran Uzbek leader Abdul Rashid Dostum and to the Hazara Sarwar Danish; Abdullah Abdullah had chosen the Pashtun leader Mohammad Khan and the Hazara Mohammad Mohaqiq as his partners.

This was confirmed, at least until the very last days of the campaign, by the low level of violence. Although the Taliban had warned Afghan citizens not to participate in the polls, stating that they would attack the election centres, the campaign went on largely undisturbed.²⁰ In particular, the lack of attacks against the large public rallies, which were relatively easy targets, led many observers to wonder whether the Taliban had decided to allow the elections. However, the Taliban intensified violence in the days immediately preceding the election, launching large-scale attacks against offices of the IEC, the Ministry of Interior, NGOs and even a Hotel occupied by Afghan journalists and foreign observers.²¹ Despite this late upsurge, however, the general view of the analysts was that the violence caused by the insurgents had been much lower than expected.²² The EU representatives echoed in their comments, such optimism after 5 April, when they declared: «The Taliban [have] lost».²³

The announcement of the preliminary results confirmed the pre-election polls, revealing that Abdullah had prevailed with 45% of the votes, with Ashraf Ghani following with 31.6% and Zalmay Rassoul with 11.4%.²⁴ Considering that none of the candidates won a majority of votes, the IEC announced a second round of elections on 14 June between Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani.

5. *The second round*

During the second round of elections, Abdullah's side seemed to have acquired a comfortable margin, which encouraged the leading politicians to organize fewer rallies and focus instead on backroom negotiations. Some candidates and other influential figures close to Karzai – such as Zalmay Rassoul, Gul Agha Shirzai, the governor of Nangarhar, and Abdul Rasul Sayyaf – appeared ready to give their allegiance to Abdullah. This seemed to offer evidence that Karzai and his entourage had accepted the latter's victory, and that Abdullah had concluded a deal for a smooth transition. However, after the second round of elections was complete, Abdullah's entourage started claiming that large-scale frauds in favour

²⁰ 'Notification of Islamic Emirate Regarding the Upcoming Elections', *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*, 10 March 2014 (<http://www.shahamat-english.com/index.php/paighamoonah/42887-notification-of-islamic-emirate-regarding-the-upcoming-elections>); see also Kate Clark, 'Elections and Foreigners: An Analysis of Recent Taliban Violence', *AAN*, 3 April 2014.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² 'Afghanistan's Political Transition', *ICG*, p. 10.

²³ Sayed Tariq Majidi, 'EU Observers: Taliban Failed to Derail Elections', *Toloneus*, 7 April 2014.

²⁴ 'IEC Announces Final Presidential Election Results, Sets Date for Run-off', *IEC Press Releases*, Kabul, 15 May 2014.

of Ashraf Ghani had taken place. These claims were supported by the release of a series of audio recordings of phone conversations between some unidentified men – which Abdullah’s team claimed were the IEC secretary, Zia-ul-Haq Amarkhel, and other officials – who spoke about the need to favour Ghani. The ensuing scandal involved Karzai and his entourage, given that Amarkhel was generally considered «Karzai’s man». Despite Amarkhel’s attempt to resist the scandal, his position became untenable after police found him travelling without authorization with blank election ballots. Despite denying any wrongdoing, he finally resigned.²⁵

On 7 July 2014 the EIC announced the preliminary results of the second round of elections: Ghani had won 56.44%, while Abdullah received 43.56% of the votes.²⁶ The reaction of Abdullah’s team was one of shock and outrage against what they called the «triangle of fraud» – namely, Ghani, the IEC and Karzai. The day after the announcement, Abdullah met his supporters – some of which were carrying weapons – at the *Loya Jirga* tent of the Polytechnic University in Kabul, where he declared himself the winner of the elections; making a direct reference to the heavily disputed 2009 Presidential election, Abdullah stated that this time he would not give up his claims. In the tense atmosphere that followed, Afghanistan seemed to be once again on the brink of civil war: Muhammad Atta Noor, the governor of Balkh province and supporter of Abdullah, went as far as calling for the occupation of government palaces in Kabul and for the establishment of a «parallel government».²⁷ However, Abdullah showed great moderation, asking his supporters to remain patient, and instead calling for the US intervention.

6. *What happened?*

There is no consensus among the observers on the scale and direction of frauds, apart from the fact that they happened. The general view is that frauds and ballot stuffing have favoured both Abdullah and Ghani, with a higher prevalence for the latter. According to most independent analyses, however, it is unlikely that the frauds could justify such a complete reversal of the result. Still it remains very difficult to form a clear idea about electoral frauds in a peculiar context such as Afghanistan, in the light of the structural problems already mentioned. According to most

²⁵ Sayed Sharif Amiry, ‘Abdullah Team Releases Audio Recordings Implicating Amarkhail’, *Toloneews*, 22 June 2014; ‘Afghanistan’s Political Transition’, *ICG*, p. 5; Ahmad Mukhtar, ‘Election Scandal Brings Down Afghan Official’, *CBS News*, 23 June 2014.

²⁶ ‘IEC Announces Preliminary Results of the 2014 Presidential Election Run-off’, *IEC Press Releases*, Kabul, 7 July 2014.

²⁷ Rob Crilly, ‘Afghan Presidential Candidate Rejects Election «Coup» and «Plans Parallel Government»’, *The Telegraph*, 8 July 2014.

international experts, the absence of a voters list and the tendency by the IEC to issue cards in excess to the actual number of voters, makes the task of safeguarding the regularity of the process almost impossible. The fact that these problems were known for years and that, despite this, the international actors pressed Kabul to respect the electoral schedule, should lead to a serious discussion about the responsibility of the international community for what happened.

Obviously Ghani's team defended the result. According to their view, the increase in the number of votes was due to the return to a more «traditional» style of campaigning: Ghani had established contacts with tribal leaders and religious scholars, who helped him in reaching out to voters. Moreover, Ghani's entourage candidly admitted to having established contacts with at least two insurgency groups – *Hezb-i-Islami Gulbuddin* and *Haqqani* – in order to get protection from violence and carrying on the campaign in the areas controlled by them. The fact that, in the second round of elections, Ghani received the support of influential figures in the South, such as Qayyum Karzai, would also have contributed to spreading his message.²⁸

It is difficult to value the weight of these explanations. However, it may be safely stated that the second round of elections was much more influenced by ethnic considerations than the first. The two camps increasingly began to be identified according to their prevalent ethnic affiliation: Tajiks and Hazaras for Abdullah, Pashtuns and Uzbeks for Ghani. This factor may have considerably influenced the result, although it is difficult to say to what extent. To add to the existing confusion, the data announced by the IEC were extremely unreliable: most observers have found it difficult to believe that the turnout of the run-off was higher than that of the first round, when all the available observations suggest the opposite. Moreover, the IEC announced that they invalidated less than 12,000 votes (about 0.15% of the total) which seemed to be a very low number compared to the past elections, when the rate tended to be around 20% (18.8% in the 2009 Presidential poll).²⁹

7. *The US intervention*

Since the beginning of the crisis, the US administration emphasised their neutrality and appealed to both candidates to maintain calm. On 7 July 2014 Abdullah announced that he had received a phone call from President Barack Obama and that the Secretary of State John Kerry would soon come to Kabul. On 12 July, Kerry, after at least two days of negotiations, together with the two candidates and the Special Representative

²⁸ 'Afghanistan's Political Transition', *ICG*, p. 17.

²⁹ Martine van Bijlert, 'Elections 2014 (38): Candidate Positioning after the Preliminary Results', *AAN*, 9 July 2014.

of the UN Secretary General, Jan Kubiš, announced an «internationally supervised» audit of the votes, to be held in Kabul with the assistance of ISAF. More importantly, Kerry stated that both candidates had agreed to «abide by the results of the audit and that the winner of the election [would] serve as president and [would] immediately form a government of national unity».³⁰ This result was not an easy one to obtain. From one point of view, Hamid Karzai's opposition to international «interference» was well known. In fact, after meeting the two candidates, Kerry was said to have met Karzai separately. Moreover, considerable international pressure seems to have been exerted on the IEC and the IECG in order to have them accept the audit.³¹

However, new difficulties soon arose. First, the 12 July 2014 agreement had apparently left space for different interpretations, and in fact a conflict emerged between the two camps. Second, in early August, a new conflict exploded regarding the criteria of the audit, which – according to Abdullah's team – were not rigorous enough to reveal the extent of the fraud. All this forced John Kerry to return to Kabul on 7 August in order to resolve the impasse. After meeting again with the two candidates and Karzai, the US Secretary of State conducted another press conference with Ghani and Abdullah in which they confirmed the July deal.³² However, in order to resolve all remaining objections posed by Abdullah, the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon had to personally endorse the result of the audit. In a message on 11 September 2014, he supported the regularity of the audit, defining it as «robust, comprehensive and consistent with international best practices».³³

8. *The final outcome and the GNU*

On 21 September 2014, after prolonged negotiations between the two parties and more than five months since the beginning of the process, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah signed an agreement aimed to form a new GNU. Interestingly enough, the deal was announced – and signed – before the disclosure to the public of the audit's result by the IEC. Apparently, this choice was made on a specific request by Abdullah's team, lest that the result could spark violence. In fact, a few hours later, the IEC chairman announced that the audit had been completed and that Ashraf

³⁰ 'Kerry Announces «Comprehensive Audit» of Disputed Afghan Election', *The Guardian*, 12 July 2014; see also Kate Clark, 'Elections 2014 (39): Has Kerry Saved the Day?', *AAN*, 14 July 2014.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Kate Clark, 'Elections 2014 (49): Still Deadlock, Make or Break', *AAN*, 14 September 2014.

³³ 'In Telephone Calls with Candidates, Ban Stressed Need for Abiding by Commitment', *UNAMA News Update*, 11 September 2014.

Ghani was the new President. However, no figures were given, and the IEC stated that the results had been «submitted to both candidates...and [would] be published on the IEC website in the near future.»³⁴

The deal provided for the creation of no less than five new institutions: a CEO, with the powers of an «executive prime minister» – a position which was immediately occupied by Abdullah –, two deputies, a council of ministers and a leader of the opposition.³⁵ Despite the considerable time spent by the political actors in discussing details, the new arrangement seemed to be filled with contradictions. The ambiguity was especially evident with reference to the relationship between the President and the CEO. While one passage of the deal stated that the CEO would be «under the authority of the President»,³⁶ the remaining parts of the document seemed to present the two figures as holding equal power. In fact, it is easy to see that the GNU has emerged as an attempt to translate a power-sharing mechanism between two same-level partners into constitutional terms.³⁷ However, the remaining ambiguity in the deal might cause future contestations. It is also easy to see that the new arrangement considerably altered Afghanistan's institutional structures, posing some *de facto* limits to the President's powers and creating a sort of hybrid «half-presidential/half-parliamentary» system. In fact, the President himself has announced the convening of a *Loya Jirga*, with the task of amending the Constitution, which seems to indicate that Ghani intends to complete the modification of the institutional structure. After all, this would be in line with Ghani's thought, given that he stated, before the elections, to be in favour of diluting the Presidential powers after Karzai's long reign.³⁸ Moreover, according to some observers, the constitutional *Loya Jirga* could be the first step towards conceding to the minorities a major degree of decentralization; apparently, this is a request that Ghani received from his Uzbek ally Abdul Rashid Dostum.³⁹ Anyway, the balance of power between the President and the CEO will be measured soon by the new government appointments. This will be a very relevant and delicate passage, given that both Ghani and Abdullah have to distribute power among the various political figures that have provided their vote banks. These uncertainties, together with the failure of the two leaders to fully disclose the details of the political deal, have certainly contributed to a new

³⁴ 'IEC Announces Results of Presidential Run-Off after Extensive Audit of all (100%) Ballots', *IEC Press Releases*, Kabul, 21 September 2014.

³⁵ Kate Clark, 'Elections 2014 (51): Finally a Deal, but not yet Democracy', *AAN*, 21 September 2014.

³⁶ See text of the agreement in: *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Kate Clark, '2014 Elections (20): The Ashraf Ghani interview', *AAN*, 18 May 2014.

³⁹ Kate Clark, 'Elections 2014 (51): Finally a Deal but not yet Democracy', *AAN*, 21 September 2014.

pessimistic outlook on Afghanistan's transition. While emphasizing its historical character, it is impossible to deny that backroom negotiations rather than voters have decided the final outcome, thus making the transition less «democratic» than expected.

9. *Election and Taliban strategy*

In comparison to the 2009 Presidential election, when the Taliban policy was that of disrupting the vote, in 2014 the insurgency – or at least part of it – seemed to have adopted a much more pragmatic style.⁴⁰ This is in line with a gradual process of politicisation of the insurgency, which has been observed in the field. Over the past few years, the Taliban have basically conducted a two-fold strategy: the first was the military offensive against the foreign troops and the pro-government Afghan forces; the second was the attempt to offer an image of the movement as a reliable shadow-government, capable of providing a better administration than the Karzai regime.⁴¹

This is a crucial background to understand the sometimes-contradictory approach of the Taliban towards the elections in 2014. Despite the strong statements issued before the election, the actual level of violence deployed by the insurgents has been low.⁴² Well-informed analysts have explained this peculiarity as a division inside the movement between a sector in favour of the disruption of the electoral process, and another that preferred to manipulate it in order to obtain a «favourable» President. According to various sources, before and during the first round of the election, some Taliban commanders had talks with local Pashtun tribal assemblies, regarding the possibility of supporting Ashraf Ghani. These talks became more frequent when it became clear that the strongest candidates were Ghani and Abdullah; many sectors among the Pashtuns thought that a victory of the Tajik leader would be detrimental to their interest. A further important factor has been the external pressure exercised by Saudi Arabia, which saw the election of Abdullah negatively. Saudi authorities apparently pressured the Taliban to allow the vote to go on, in the belief that an attempt to obstruct the election would have probably affected only the Pashtuns, therefore giving an advantage to Abdullah.⁴³

All these different pressures made the division inside the insurgency more manifest than before. Therefore, during the first round of elections, the insurgency approached the political process with almost as many

⁴⁰ Antonio Giustozzi and Silab Mangal, 'Violence, the Taliban and Afghanistan's 2014 Elections', *Peaceworks*, United States Institute of Peace, 2014.

⁴¹ See Diego Abenante, 'Afghanistan: La «ritirata strategica» dell'Occidente e i nuovi tentativi di negoziato con i Taliban', *Asia Maior 2012*, pp. 121-123.

⁴² Kate Clark, 'Elections and Foreigners'.

⁴³ Antonio Giustozzi and Silab Mangal, 'Violence, the Taliban', p. 16.

strategies as the number of existing *shuras* (Taliban councils). Some of the latter decided not to attack the voters, others did it but in a «soft» manner, and still others – particularly the Haqqani-led Miran Shah *shura* – carried on with the military offensive. This situation can explain the otherwise ambivalent strategy followed by the Taliban between February and April. However, much of this changed after the announcement of the preliminary result, with Abdullah apparently ahead. The possibility of a Tajik President was seen as a danger by many Taliban, and also intensified the external pressures on the insurgency to allow the vote. Therefore, although considerable differences remained, in the second round of elections, the general strategy was that of not disrupting the vote, particularly in the Pashtun belt, in order to advantage Ghani.

In short, the election emphasised the difficulties faced by the movement in its shift from a purely military-ideological movement to a political one, mainly due to the lack of a universally recognised hierarchy. This said, the election of Ghani may open new perspectives of dialogue with the insurgency. The statements by the new President, soon after his nomination, about the need to reopen the reconciliation process may give further strength to this path.⁴⁴

10. *The end of Enduring Freedom and the start of Resolute Support*

On 28 December 2014, with a ceremony in Kabul, NATO and ISAF troops officially ended their combat operations in Afghanistan after 13 years, leaving the task of continuing the war on the ANSF. As noted above, there is a close link between Afghanistan's political transition and the end of the OEF. Without the successful completion of the presidential election it would have been impossible to sign the BSA with the US – a pact that former President Karzai had refused to sign in 2013. On the other hand, without the BSA, the US had declared their unwillingness to guarantee the continued support to Kabul that the Obama administration had promised.

However, the 28 December ceremony has not, in fact, ended the foreign military presence in the country, as NATO and the US have inaugurated the new RS mission. According to NATO sources, the new mission will have only training and support aims and will involve more than 12,500 soldiers from 28 NATO member countries and 14 partner States. Media sources also suggest that, besides the RS mission, there will be a presence of 5,550 US troops involved in anti-terrorist activities against *al Qa'ida*.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Rateb Noori, 'Ghani Stresses Inter-Afghan Dialogue in Calls for Peace Talks', *Toloneus*, 31 October 2014.

⁴⁵ 'Transition Ceremonies kicks off Resolute Support Mission', *NATO News*, Kabul, 28 December 2014; Sune Engel Rasmussen, 'Nato Ends Combat Operations in

Apart from the institutional changes, during the past twelve months, the main development was the transformation of the conflict from an international one to a civil war. This development is visible from the data on casualties, which reveal that the number of victims among foreign troops constantly decreased, reaching the lowest number in 2014 with 75 casualties. The reverse side of the coin has been the rise in the number of Afghan victims, both military and civilians. According to independent sources, in 2014 alone there have been approximately 5,000 casualties among the members of ANSF – 3,200 of which belonged to the National or Local Police, and the rest to the ANA.⁴⁶ The year 2014 also saw the highest number of casualties among the Afghan civilian population. It has been estimated by the UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan) that the number reached 10,000 at the end of the year, with an increase of 19% since 2013.⁴⁷ Independent analysts and UN sources have explained the rise in civilian deaths with a change of strategy by the Taliban.⁴⁸ Due to the reduced protection provided by ISAF and NATO, the Taliban have been spreading their operations, attacking the ANSF in open battles in populated areas. In such circumstances, the possibility of civilians being involved in ground battles has sharply increased. The insurgents have also used targeted killings and suicide attacks in order to intimidate government servants, village elders and Peace Councils members.⁴⁹ On the other hand, the Taliban have made less use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IED), which were the Taliban's favoured tactic between 2007 and 2011.⁵⁰ The withdrawal of foreign troops is also likely to have other consequences on the Taliban strategy. With the war becoming more and more an intra-Afghan conflict, it has become increasingly difficult for the Taliban to justify the war as a *jihad*, as it may be observed through the analysis of their statements.⁵¹ Indeed, the change of the nature of the war from a struggle against foreign invaders to a civil conflict might become a problem for the insurgency, as it is bound to put in doubt its legitimacy in the Afghans' eyes.

Afghanistan', *The Guardian*, 28 December 2014.

⁴⁶ The international troops have suffered 3,485 casualties in 13 years; 'US and NATO Formally End War in Afghanistan', *The New York Times*, 28 December 2014.

⁴⁷ Kay Johnson, 'Civilian Deaths in Afghanistan War Reach New High in 2014: UN', *Reuters*, Kabul, 19 December 2014.

⁴⁸ Obaid Ali, 'The Empty Streets of Mohammad Agha: Logar's Struggle Against the Taleban', *AAN*, 15 December 2014; 'Mid-year Report 2014, Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict', *UNAMA*, Kabul, July 2014, pp. 1-8 (http://unama.unmissions.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=m_XyrUQDKZg%3D&).

⁴⁹ The Peace Councils were created by President Karzai in 2010 in order to implement the program of national reconciliation with the insurgency. See Diego Abenante, 'L'Afghanistan nel 2010', pp. 111-114.

⁵⁰ 'Operation Enduring Freedom, IED Fatalities' (<http://icasualties.org/OEF/Index.aspx>); Obaid Ali, 'The Empty Streets of Mohammad Agha'.

⁵¹ Kate Clark, 'Elections and Foreigners'.

11. *The prospects for peace*

Although what has been said does not seem to justify any optimism for the future, two factors suggest that the new political landscape in Kabul may offer a historical occasion for achieving peace. These elements are, first, the much improved cooperation between Pakistan, US and Afghanistan regarding the peace process and second, the fact that Ashraf Ghani is better placed than Karzai to carry on the peace negotiations with the Taliban. From the first point of view, during 2014, Pakistan appeared to collaborate with the US in a manner that had not been seen for at least ten years.⁵² In 2014, the US was, for the first time, targeting Pakistani Taliban who found refuge in Afghan territory, a move which seemed to be an exchange for Islamabad's greater activism in arresting or killing *al-Qa'ida* members in Pakistani territory. The change in Pakistani attitude seems to be related to a growing awareness that a stabilization of the Afghan political scene is a necessary step for putting an end to Pakistan troubles with its own militancy.⁵³ Moreover, the political transition in Kabul and the international withdrawal are likely to create a political space for which both India and Pakistan will compete. India's economic activism in Afghanistan was confirmed early in 2014 by the announcement of a 2 billion dollars investment in Afghanistan.⁵⁴ In the wake of Indian economic initiatives, Islamabad is well aware of the crucial importance of enhancing the economic ties between the border Afghan-Pakistan regions, which in turn requires placing militancy under control.⁵⁵ Ashraf Ghani's rise to power also offers some new opportunities to keep the peace process on going. As noted above, Ghani already established contacts with some sectors of the insurgency during the election. After his nomination, he sent signals to the Taliban that he intends to strengthen what he has termed «inter-Afghan dialogue».⁵⁶ While the Taliban have been repeating their intention to keep fighting as long as «a single foreigner remains in Afghanistan in a military uniform», there is evidence that at least some Taliban commanders in the field favour establishing a dialogue with Ghani.⁵⁷

⁵² Ahmed Rashid, 'A Reinvigorated Anti-Taliban Alliance?', *BBC News*, 9 December 2014.

⁵³ 'Resetting Pakistan's Relations with Afghanistan', *ICG, Asia Report N°262*, 28 October 2014, pp. 5-8.

⁵⁴ Katharine Houreld, 'India and Pakistan Ramp up Aid as they Jostle for Influence in Afghanistan', *Reuters*, 4 March 2014.

⁵⁵ ICG, 'Resetting Pakistan's Relations with Afghanistan', pp. 11-17.

⁵⁶ Rateb Noori, 'Ghani Stresses Inter-Afghan Dialogue'.

⁵⁷ 'Statement of Islamic Emirate regarding the End of the Failed ISAF Mission in Afghanistan', (<http://www.shahamat-english.com/index.php/paighamoona/51748-statement-of-islamic-emirate-regarding-the-end-of-the-failed-isaf-mission-in-afghanistan>), 29 December 2014; Antonio Giustozzi and Silab Mangal, 'Violence, the Taliban and Afghanistan's 2014 Elections', pp. 27-28.

The future, however, remains highly uncertain, given the great division of strategy that currently exists between the Taliban commanders. Moreover, it is yet to be seen what measure of political weight will be given in the power sharing deal in Kabul to Abdullah Abdullah, whose reservations about the peace talks with the Taliban are well known.

12. *Economic development*

Political and security uncertainty dominated the Afghan economy in 2014. The basic economic indicators were, on the whole, stable compared to 2013. Still the economy confirmed the negative trend that emerged since 2011. The GDP growth in the fiscal year 2014 (which ended on December 21, 2014) is estimated to have reached 3.5%, which marks a slight increase compared to the 3.3% of 2013. However, the figure shows a negative trend that has affected the economy since the GDP exceptional rise of 2012. This volatility can be explained, first of all, with the large dependence on agriculture, which is linked to the variable weather conditions. After the peak of 2012, when an exceptionally good harvest pushed agricultural production to a 31.5% growth, the figure slipped to a very low 1.6% in 2013 and remained basically unchanged in 2014. The growth rate of per capita GDP reached 1.5%, with a 0.2% improvement from 2013.⁵⁸

On the demand side, the reduction of the international military presence has had a negative effect; this is a structural change to which the Afghan economy needs to adjust. However, things have been made worse by the uncertainty about the approval of the Bilateral Security Agreement with the US, which lasted until September 2014 when Ghani signed the document. Most analysts foresee that this development will pave the way for an improved 2015 performance. The year 2014 confirmed Afghanistan's dependence on international assistance, which accounted for about 60% of its budget expenditure.⁵⁹ This factor causes the country's economic balance to be precariously linked to the evolution of the international political climate, and to the state of Kabul's relations to donor countries. As expected, among the other economic indicators, the inflation rate decreased from 7.4% (2013) to 6.8% at the end of 2014, in the wake of the lower level of private consumption. It is important to note that most observers foresee an improvement for 2015, on the basis of the apparently stabilized political situation. Much of this, of course, will need to be confirmed.

A clearly negative development concerns the situation of opium production. The relevance of this indicator lies not only in the fact that Af-

⁵⁸ 'Asian Development Outlook 2014', *Asian Development Bank*, 2014, pp. 155-157 (<http://adb.org/sites/default/files/pub/2014/ado-2014.pdf>).

⁵⁹ Gabriel Dominguez, 'Afghan Economy at a Crossroads', *Deutsche Welle*, 25 March 2014.

ghanistan produces at least 90% of world's opium, but also in the connection between production and security conditions in the provinces. The total area dedicated to poppy cultivation in 2014 marked a 7% increase since 2013. The spread of cultivation in the territory confirmed the close link between opium-production and the strength of the insurgency, given that the vast majority of the opium (89%) was produced in the nine provinces of the South and West where government control is weaker.⁶⁰ The Afghan government appears to have made considerable efforts to obstruct opium production. In addition to the physical eradication campaigns, in 2013, Kabul started a program called «Food Zone», which was aimed to reduce the farmers' dependency on opium poppy and to support their shift to licit productions. However, in the areas where the program has been started – such as in Helmand, which alone produced 46% of all Afghan opium – the 2014 results were disappointing.⁶¹ Poppy eradication activities have also marked a considerably negative trend, with a decrease of 63%. This worrying development is connected to the worsening security conditions in the southwestern provinces, and the governors' consequent difficulty in implementing the eradication policy.⁶²

L'Afghanistan nel 2014 è stato dominato da due eventi tra loro interconnessi: le elezioni presidenziali e la fine della missione di combattimento delle truppe ISAF e NATO. Le elezioni hanno condotto alla nomina di Ashraf Ghani, pur confermando i gravi problemi strutturali del meccanismo elettorale afgano. Abdullah Abdullah, già leader dell'opposizione a Karzai e giunto in seconda posizione al termine del ballottaggio, ha rifiutato il risultato elettorale. La conseguente crisi politica è stata risolta con la formazione di un governo di unità nazionale formato sotto l'egida degli Usa e dell'ONU. Le truppe internazionali hanno completato il loro ritiro dal paese, confermando al contempo una presenza militare tramite la nuova operazione Resolute Support. Quest'ultima dovrebbe, in teoria, avere solo compiti di supporto alle forze di sicurezza afgane, lasciando dunque a quest'ultime la responsabilità della guerra contro l'insorgenza.

⁶⁰ 'Afghanistan Opium Survey 2014', UNODC, November 2014 (<http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afghan-opium-survey-2014.pdf>).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶² *Ibid.*

