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Taliban and democracy: The unequal equation



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ON JUNE 18TH THE TALIBAN OPENED A LIAISON OFFICE IN DOHA, THE CAPITAL CITY OF THE STATE OF QATAR, A CLOSE ALLY OF THE US IN THE PERSIAN GULF REGION

On June 18th the Taliban opened a liaison office in Doha, the capital city of the state of Qatar, a close ally of the US in the Persian Gulf region. This does not come as a surprise since negotiations about the opening of such a facility started already a few years ago. Taken into account the unfortunate trajectory of US/NATO's engagement in Afghanistan, the Obama administration has realised that a military solution to the conflict is not possible and a satisfying political solution regarding the goals that were set by his predecessor, George W. Bush, to establish a democratic, stabilised, and socio-economic prospering Afghanistan have become increasingly unrealistic. Subsequently, in 2009 Obama significantly narrowed the scope of the mission "to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaida in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future". In consequence, when/if the Taliban are willing to cut off their links with al-Qaeda, they are not any more identified as a primary target or combatant. The fact that Bush's "war against terrorism" got condensed into a struggle against al-Qaeda is today used as a moral justification for starting talks with the Taliban.

However, considering the tremendous human losses and the extra-ordinary financial burden which ensued its involvement in Afghanistan, it is understandable to a certain degree that the US is trying to organise a more or less smooth troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. Of course, the first and most essential step in this direction is to get in touch with one's foe to spot a way to get out of the Afghan imbroglio.

Obviously, the matter of an exit strategy which ensures a safe and rapid withdrawal is identified as the top priority by the US at the moment. In order to achieve this, it seems that the Obama administration does not mind to distance itself from Bush's prior aims and is willing to accept the participation of the Taliban in the government of Afghanistan. In sum one could argue that the purchase of security will be most likely on the expense of liberty and human rights!

Based on the naive illusion that one can negotiate and implement an agreement in a sustainable manner with ideologically indoctrinated fundamentalists, the US starts talks with the Taliban over power-sharing in Afghanistan in exchange for less trouble. Here one of the

most disturbing features of the whole issue is found; the sudden appearance of the notion that the Taliban are willing to participate as a trustworthy stakeholder in the political-administrative system of Afghanistan and the –deliberately or unintended- total ignorance of former experiences of Taliban's incredibility and adamant ideological mind-set and standpoints. It is interesting to note here, that at the beginning of NATO's Afghanistan campaign it was a taboo to mention any idea of direct negotiation with the Taliban in order to work out a political solution.

Several politicians mentioning this idea got under severe political pressure, like Kurt Beck in April 2007, a then leading oppositional German politician from the Social Democratic Party (SPD). In contrast, today it seems that any substantial questioning of talks with the Taliban is considered as a sacrilege risking the minimum change of a political solution for the still on-going war.

This is gaining momentum since the new attitude enforces a trend of ignoring the actual major cause for 12 years of fighting, thousands of deaths and billions of dollars: The fact that the Taliban movement is an anti-systemic, terrorist force with a deeply non-negotiable anti-democratic habitus. Both the Pakistani Taliban and the Afghan Taliban are not in favour of any form of democratic government. They condemn all kinds of liberal values and norms, respect for human rights as well as democratic institutions like political parties and elections as anti-Islamic and alien concepts. In brief, all Taliban factions -independent from different organisational structure, strategies, tactics or interests- are fundamentally autocratic in nature.

Therefore, using the argument of the necessity to integrate the Taliban into the political structure of Afghanistan and the subsequent need to give them a share of power in order to achieve peace and stability is not only dangerous, reckless and a distortion of facts but also hypocritical. There are no serious indications that the Taliban will change their interests and tactics, especially their major goal of re-establishing the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, an extra-ordinary repressive autocratic regime controlling the country between 1996-2001 until it got ousted by the international community.

The fact, that the Taliban used the flag and the name of their former regime during the inauguration of

their new office in Doha is just another confirmation of this.

A major crux of the talks between the US and the Taliban is that as soon as they go beyond talking about a ceasefire and other issues related with the armed conflict it will be characterised by a tremendous lack of legitimacy and democratic deficit. This is because of two reasons: First, any agreement between US and Taliban which will affect the power structure and the institutional-administrative system is illegitimate since it is an outcome of a decision-making process which is not recognized by the Afghan constitution. Second, the only legitimate actor, the Afghan executive in combination with and legislative

(which amounts to 42% of the Afghan population), they will never be able to make an inroad into the Tajik (27%), Uzbek (9%) or Hazara (9%) communities in order to achieve a majority of votes. Furthermore, the demographic statistic is turning even more against the Taliban in the context of election when one recalls their strict rejection of women participation in public sphere as well as in politics.

Also their repressive actions against the rudimentary but growing civil society organisations which use internet-based social networks will backfire. One should also keep in mind, that not all Pashtuns are in favour of the Taliban and that a

tional agreement of power-sharing will be enforced, the Taliban will obtain legitimacy and an official, formal bridgehead in the political-administrative system.

Despite the fact that the upcoming Doha talks are lacking legitimacy, the US will make sure that the talks will prepare the ground for a US-Taliban arrangement dealing with the conditions and potential concessions. There are already several occasions, showing that the US –including the Obama administration- do not care about democratic norms, values and procedures when it contradicts their own security and geopolitical interests in Afghanistan. Some of the examples include the 'enthronement' of

the end of all improvements regarding the democratic transition and the situation of women and girls. In this context, one must also state that the Taliban will not feel bound by the any constitution or legal framework ensuring general fundamental and human rights. The way in which the Taliban were trying to sabotage Pakistan's 2013 general elections, in order to archive their goal of a Sharia-based autocratic regime, clearly shows that the democratic path of assuming power through free and fair elections and especially the respect of freedom of speech and opinion is not an option for them.

It also casts some dark shadows on the upcoming elections in Afghanistan. Because the only choice in their ideologically narrow and truncated thinking is between two options: surrender to the Taliban political and social-cultural supremacy go prepare for war which means struggling with all kind of physical and physiological violence.

Endemic violence caused by the Taliban, blackmailing and threatening of rival political parties as well as their candidates and supporters, potential voters will doubtless remain as a significant feature in Afghanistan landscape even after one for the US satisfying outcome of the Doha talks is achieved, meaning primarily a smooth withdrawal of the bulk of their combat troops.

Therefore, the talks with the Taliban are not about achieving a sustainable peace, stable process of democratic consolidation, or rescuing the rare achievements of more than one decade of engagement by the international community. Instead, they are more about trying to bring a smooth end to the US's military adventure in Afghanistan and to shirk Washington's responsibilities towards the Afghan people. One can't help but feeling that history repeats itself. The current situation seems a déjà vu of Nixon's „Vietnamisation“ doctrine in the late 1960s when the US was seeking a way out of Vietnam without a loss of face. To sum up, there was war before NATO and there will be war after NATO. Unfortunately, this mantra will be not valid for the state of democracy in Afghanistan!

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The opening of the Taliban's political office in Qatar last week. Members of the group have been speaking about a peace agreement in Afghanistan, but Western diplomats say they remain wary

which is representing the people's sovereignty (if one ignores the manifold manipulations of the last presidential elections in 2009) is either not included or not taken seriously by the other negotiations partner. Consequently, any substantial agreement, which leads to a reshaping of the existing power-structure, is not legitimate until it is approved by the respective Afghan institutions.

Having this in mind, it is especially noteworthy, that in case of a political rehabilitation and amnesty the Taliban will have most likely no chance at the moment to get into power through free and fair elections. First of all, even if the numerous factions of the Taliban are willing to agree on one organ of formal political representation (political party) and if they are able to gain the support of the Pashtun popu-

homogenous pro-Taliban Pashtun backing remains a myth. Considering the mechanisms of Afghanistan electoral system do not encourage the formation of coalition governments the option for forming political alliances are limited.

However, being aware of the fact that elections are most likely no option for them to achieve power they will enforce a process to undermine the notion of election as the only way of political elite recruitment and government formation. By realising this, the Taliban will most likely agree on certain demands—at least on paper—to gain political capital out of the withdrawal of the foreign troops, in the form of legitimization and by the US-backed institutionalized role for them.

When such an extra-constitu-

Karzai in the aftermath of the first Bonn conference in 2001 and the ignorance of the manipulated presidential elections under the eyes of the international community, and the total ignorance of it during the second Bonn conference in 2011.

However, it is highly probably that any allocated segments for the Taliban in the country's political decision-making process will serve as a starting point for a gradual extension of their institutional leverage during the next tenure after the presidential election in spring 2014. The country's judicial system, education sector and the constitution as well as respective ministries and commissions will be some of the first, primary targets. In other words, what will happen is a 're-Talibanisation' of the state and therefore also the society.

Without any doubts this means