

Twin seat on the roller coaster

Compromise offers Kabul a glimmer of hope, writes Michael Keating

This has been a roller-coaster year for Afghans. It has included vigorous presidential and provincial election campaigns, a protracted political crisis, the formation of a government of national unity, the inauguration of a president with big new ideas, a financial crunch, devastating natural disasters, widening Taliban attacks and a surge in the number of Afghans being killed. Meanwhile, the US-led International Security Assistance Force is winding down and will conclude in December.

Many hope that the ride will be less nerve-racking from now on. But the future may be just as tumultuous.

The era of Hamid Karzai, in power since 2002, has ended. Two experienced and capable men are now at the helm. President Ashraf Ghani is a former World Bank official and minister of finance. Abdullah Abdullah, former mujahedin fighter and foreign minister, occupies the new post of chief executive, created to resolve the dispute over the legality of the presidential election.

The new government has the goodwill of the international community. This includes countries in the region such as China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia and the Central Asian states anxious to minimize the impact that instability in Afghanistan will have on them. The signature of a bilateral security agreement with the US lays the basis for continued western financial and military

support to Afghanistan. It will help the US and its allies to move on from the increasingly fraught relationship with Karzai. They need to protect some of the gains that have been made since 2001, at great human and financial cost.

The US alone has spent more than \$650 billion on Afghanistan since 2001, including \$100 billion on civilian aid. A 'descent into chaos' is the last thing anyone wants. Speculation is growing as to how events in Iraq and Syria, including the rise of Islamic State, will affect Afghanistan, and the wisdom of the drawdown schedule.

The success of the 'Afghan project', and prospects for 30 million long-suffering citizens, now depend upon the robustness of the new government in resolving the conflict with the Taliban, accommodating political, tribal and ethnic interests, and mobilizing institutional capacity to implement a reform agenda.

The point of departure is not ideal. Time will tell whether the wheeler-dealing around the elections will fade from memory or dog every step the government takes.

Afghans want change – jobs, access to education and health services, and an end to the abuse of power that

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is corroding everyday life. Afghans have a keen sense of accountability. Most feel that this has been defiled by a self-serving elite that has benefited from the financial bonanza that accompanied the international intervention.

The first round of the elections in April proved to be an inspiring expression of popular will, a vote against abuse and violence, and for political change.

But the second round in June was marred by bitter accusations of industrial scale fraud. The three long months of uncertainty that followed brought the country to a standstill, paralyzing government and sapping business confidence. They did nothing for the morale of the Afghan national security forces battling intensified Taliban attacks.

The crisis was contained by a frenzy of political negotiations and an intrusive audit by electoral authorities and the UN of all eight million votes cast. This culminated not, as might have been expected, in a definitive declaration of the result, but in the agreement of September 21 between the two men to form the government of national unity.

This arrangement may be the least bad option for the country. The agreement that brought it into being is a reflection of Afghanistan's hybrid governmental system, combining constitutional correctness with accommodation of powerful interests. Senior officials will be appointed both on the basis of 'merit, honesty and commitment to reform', but also through intense consultation between the president and chief executive – to keep electoral promises and accommodate power brokers.

A good omen is the dignified behaviour of the two protagonists. Moreover, Ghani has a clear vision for the country – which many say his predecessor lacked. It is based upon its rich human and natural resources, geographical location and proximity to emerging markets, traditions of governance, and respect for the law, including women's rights.

Ghani's intellectual capacity, integrity and commitment are not in doubt. Nor are Abdullah's credentials as a patriot and diplomat. The issue is whether they and their supporters can find a basis to work together in the face of formidable obstacles to deliver a more equitable and peaceful future.

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