

The Leadership and Democracy Lab

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Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Near Future

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The current political climate of Afghanistan and Pakistan holds the potential for either unprecedented stability or violent volatility in the region, depending on how the two governments can deal with the institutional threats and the spectre of terrorism. The June 2014 elections that saw the victory of economist and intellectual Ashraf Ghani marked the first democratic transfer of power in Afghan history, and the largely agricultural economy in Afghanistan has been steadily improving since the ousting of the Taliban following NATO intervention in 2001.¹ Despite this progress both financially and politically, the departure of NATO forces in the December of 2014 and the months following will set the stage for Afghanistan as a sovereign democracy. With western military aid preparing its exit, all eyes will be on how Ghani can repel the possible resurgence of the Taliban, who in recent months have intensified their violent attacks against the government. While Ghani recently stressed the need for peaceful dialogue to support an “Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process”,² many groups such as the National Coalition of Afghanistan, led by 2014 election loser and CEO of Government Abdullah Abdullah are more inclined to opposing the Taliban through militancy.³ The tenuous coalition government of Ghani and Abdullah will have to negotiate within their own government the proper steps to combat a growing threat from the Taliban.

In Pakistan, the 2013 election of Nawaz Sharif as Prime Minister has raised issues as calls for his ouster amid allegations of election rigging and corruption have come from large protest groups, led by populist politician and former Cricketer Imran Khan. Pakistan is only 6 years removed from total military rule under Pervez Musharraf as President, and the omnipresent fear of future military takeover rests on many Pakistani minds as they look to solidify their democratic institutions. These problems are compounded by Pakistan’s tenuous relationship with terrorism in the region, as they came under scrutiny from the West for harboring many internationally pursued terrorists, including most notably Osama Bin-Laden. In a November 4th report from the Pentagon, US officials assert that Pakistan uses proxy fighters in both Afghanistan and India to “hedge against a growing loss of influence in Afghanistan and to counter India’s superior military”.⁴ The recent bombing on the Pakistan side of the Wagah border

¹ “Afghanistan GDP Annual Growth Rate,” Trading Economics, <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/afghanistan/gdp-growth-annual>

² “Afghan President Ghani invites Taliban to join peace process,” Associated Press, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1141571/afghan-president-ghani-invites-taliban-to-join-peace-process>

³ “Profile: Abdullah Abdullah”, *BBC News Asia*, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-27138728>.

⁴ “Pentagon Report a Manifestation of Pakistan’s Support to Terror,” *Economic Times*, http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/pentagon-report-a-manifestation-of-pakistans-support-to-terrorism-india/etvertical_articles/45035542.cms.

in the politically volatile Punjab region, claimed to be done by a Pakistani splinter cell of the Taliban, was said to be done as retaliation for a Pakistani/US coalition fight against terrorist forces in North-West Afghanistan. The threat of terrorism coupled with the disputed elections will determine how Pakistan moves forward democratically in the future.