

## Afghanistan 2014: Ripe for Revolution?

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### **Executive Summary**

Research on patterns of electoral revolution in post-Soviet countries strongly suggests that Afghanistan may be ripe for revolution in or before 2014, when elections are scheduled to choose President Hamid Karzai's successor. These conditions include a sociopolitical context oriented more toward personal relationships than policy issues, a strongly presidentialist constitution, and an unpopular incumbent facing a lame duck syndrome. The American pullout scheduled for that same time will likely exacerbate the lame duck syndrome and magnify the risk. While the Taliban is one possible beneficiary, it is only one of several.

### **The Logic of Revolution in Countries like Afghanistan**

A "patronal president" is a president who rules under a strongly presidentialist constitution in a society where the rule of law is low, corruption is high, and politics is mainly about extended personal networks rather than policy issues. Such presidents stay in power primarily through machine politics, selectively doling out rewards and meting out punishments. Their power to do so depends on the confidence of everyone in the system that the president will be there in the future to deliver on the rewards or punishments promised now. For this reason, a patronal president's regime can collapse suddenly when he or she becomes expected to leave office due to term limits or some other reason. The presidents' chief lieutenants, cronies, and tactical allies sense a greater chance that the rewards and punishments the president promises now will not be carried out, so they become more likely to disregard the president when preparing for the future. The different factions in the regime can thus break apart, trying either to gain

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the presidency for themselves or to ensure their rivals do not seize it. When the president is unpopular, these splits are likely to take the form of opposition to the president's policies and core network. When the president is popular, the president is better able to manage a succession since he or she can strongly influence the outcome by endorsement.

The post-Soviet experience strikingly illustrates the potency of this logic. Patronal presidents frequently saw their regimes fall apart when they became lame ducks and lacked strong public support. Research has thus found that every one of the "color revolutions" took place when an unpopular patronal president was already a lame duck. Both Eduard Shevardnadze in Georgia in 2003 and Askar Akaev in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 were in their constitutionally final terms and had already announced they would indeed leave office, and Ukraine's President Leonid Kuchma in 2004 had the right to run for reelection but opted not to. The result in all three cases was a series of major defections and betrayals by important allies, including in the presidents' own armed forces. These leaders' lack of popular support meant that such defectors easily found strong allies among the masses, who could be mobilized in opposition to the president. In a book manuscript, I show that this logic is key to explaining every single ouster of a patronal president in the post-Soviet space.

### **Why the Post-Soviet Experience is Relevant to Afghanistan**

Afghanistan clearly differs in some ways from the former Soviet Union, but the similarities indicate it might be susceptible to the same dynamics and the differences might even make it *more* susceptible rather than less, and potentially with a much more disruptive and destructive outcome.

As for similarities, aside from the fact that it is not entirely devoid of its own Soviet legacy, Afghanistan is a classic case of a country where the rule of law is low, corruption high, and politics center around a logic of patron-client relations based largely on extended personalistic networks of actual acquaintance. Afghanistan also features a strongly presidentialist constitution, creating the same kind of potential for winner-take-all dynamics that can make succession struggles deadly for the regime.

Hamid Karzai has also governed as a patronal president, making use of opportunities at the nexus of state and economy and reportedly building a wide range of tactical relationships with various warlords and other political-economic players in the licit and illicit economies. His political machine thus contains a wide range of rivalrous factions (networks) that could fracture just as those in post-Soviet countries did in the event of a lame duck syndrome. Moreover, while opinion polls in this part of the world are relatively few and not completely trustworthy, Karzai has long been regarded by many as enjoying low levels of public support, perceived by many to be corrupt and ineffective. And most important of all, he is currently in a lame duck phase of his rule, with his constitutionally final second full term in office set to expire in 2014, a limitation which he has pledged to observe and to which his international partners are strongly attempting to hold him.

Another important similarity is that some of the president's political networks are reputed to be heavily involved personally in the economy as well as the polity, having a lot potentially to lose should they be ousted from power. This gives them strong incentive to resist a loss in the popular vote, perhaps by attempting fraud and/or by using various forms of coercion to hang on to power, as an October 2012 report by the International Crisis Group warned. These are precisely the kinds of actions that turn a simple election into a revolution, in which coalitions (or loose tactical alliances) of defecting elites and masses protesting on the streets combine to resist and ultimately wrest power away from the incumbent network.

One might respond that Afghanistan is "different" and that the post-Soviet experience is irrelevant, but if one keeps in mind the logic that drove the post-Soviet revolutions, Afghanistan's differences would seem to make it more vulnerable to revolution in or leading up to 2014 rather than less. One is that Karzai's political machine is not nearly as strong as those in many former Soviet countries, largely because he inherited a polity essentially destroyed by civil war and foreign invasion. But the fact that his political machine is weak makes it more vulnerable to crumbling in the face of succession struggles.

Perhaps the most important difference, of course, is the strong role of foreign powers in the country. Most obvious is the presence of NATO armed forces, in particular from the United States. These have been a crucial factor helping establish Karzai as patronal president and sustaining him in power as he constructed his political machine. Even more crucially, these troops are widely perceived to be a linchpin of his power. This perception matters regardless of reality, because it means that the American troop reductions scheduled for 2014 are likely to add to expectations that Karzai and his regime cannot stay in power into the future. This is likely to exacerbate the lame duck syndrome facing Karzai and his political machine, making it more likely to collapse, resulting in an opposition taking power or reinvigorated civil war.

The United States is not the only foreign power involved in Afghanistan, with many parties to the conflict and different factions in the regime itself having significant relationships with other states. Pakistan's involvement appears to be the most complex, with different parts of its state widely reported to be backing both Karzai and his fiercest armed opposition. Such extensive foreign intervention surely means that regime dynamics in Afghanistan depend far more on external actors than do those in post-Soviet countries. These actors could very well stifle revolutionary developments if each strongly pressures its Afghan allies toward restraint and acceptance of an election result, even if the result is widely considered fraudulent. But if powerful external actors are not happy with the outcome of the 2014 succession election, or even with what they worry in advance may be the outcome, they can also provide crucial cover to different sides contesting the results (or opposing in advance what they anticipate will be bad results). And this would make an election-related revolution more likely in Afghanistan rather than less, with a high probability for intensified civil war.

Ethnic loyalties are also unlikely to supply the glue to hold the regime in place. While Pushtuns constitute a majority by most counts, they are by no means a unified bloc, instead being subdivided into numerous networks and rivalrous factions.

### **What Would a 2014 Afghanistan Revolution Look Like?**

Revolutions typically take unexpected forms, though the logic of patronal presidential rule and the post-Soviet experience where this logic has been observed in practice generate some possibilities that should be considered.

For one thing, while revolution would seem most likely in the wake of contested presidential election results in 2014, it is possible that a presidential ouster could take place by coup or ouster prior to that date if a set of powerful elite networks is able to coordinate to settle affairs without waiting for the election, perhaps reflecting the collaboration of foreign powers. In Armenia in 1998, for example, the unpopular lame duck president Levon Ter-Petrossian was ousted by a coalition led by his own prime minister and defense minister a few years before his final term expired, a move catalyzed by unpopular concessions he announced readiness to make to resolve a conflict with Azerbaijan. In Kyrgyzstan in 2010, the unpopular lame duck president Kurmanbek Bakiyev was ousted by a popular uprising when he attempted a dramatic crackdown on media and sought to consolidate control of the economy in his family's hands—again, without waiting for the next election. But such coordination in advance of elections is difficult, especially when foreign powers backing different sides may not be inclined to agree, and indeed elections in patronalistic societies like Afghanistan's are important precisely because they provide easy and obvious "focal points" when powerful players in the system can coordinate their actions against a sitting regime, inside or outside the ballot box.

Public opinion is likely to play a major role in determining the final outcome. While it might seem that the actor with the greatest administrative, economic, or coercive might is likeliest to win, this kind of power can dissolve in revolutionary events, when networks and individuals are prone to stop taking orders and to make their own judgments about which side is most likely to win so as to jump to that side in a timely manner. But where contested elections are in place to formally and officially decide the outcome of a struggle, it is not only raw power that matters but also the ability to attract real public support. This is because public support is a major asset in its own right, helping different sides mobilize supporters to the streets, making such street protesters harder to disperse, and rendering election fraud more difficult or costly to pull off. Networks and key players looking to jump early onto the side of a winner, therefore, are likely to align with those who have strong public support. Of course, it is not always clear in Afghanistan where public support lies, or potentially lies, diluting popularity's effects. Also, foreign involvement may make rival factions less inclined to jump on someone else's bandwagon and more likely to continue fighting, raising the specter of post-revolution civil war.

This also means that even if a major revolutionary situation breaks out, it is not clear from the logic alone who would win, other than to say that it will likely be an actor

who combines both strong administrative resources (probably including some foreign backing) and substantial public support (at least relative to others). This could be a Karzai ally (or relative) who somehow gains a strong personal following in the electorate, a current ally who defects to the opposition in a timely manner and capitalizes on discontent with the president, a current outsider, or the Taliban, which could take advantage of succession-related uncertainty to mount a new bid for control of the capital, perhaps in coalition with defectors or other opposition.

While a Taliban advance is one real possibility, we should not assume it is the only one. Electoral revolutions have proven capable of rallying huge numbers of people in the name of ending corruption and establishing a bright new future of economic development, motives that many in Afghanistan share and that could (at least momentarily) overshadow the forces of religious conservatism. Thus, we cannot rule out the possibility that a new Afghan revolution would bring to power a socioeconomic populist from the old elite who would prove capable of rallying support against the Taliban. If successful, though, this would probably involve the building of a new political machine that would start to resemble the non-democratic regime in Tajikistan, which among post-Soviet countries might be the closest potential analogue.

And, of course, we must not assume that there will be a winner. Afghanistan's history suggests that a new tragedy of civil war could be the result if the country's most important networks are not able to coordinate around a new center of authority, which is especially likely if foreign actors backing different networks do not themselves somehow come to agreement and force peace.

### **Can Anything Be Done?**

It should be remembered that post-Soviet experience suggests that revolution is only a heightened risk at this point, not a certainty. It is not clear, however, that much can be done to reduce the risk at this point other than at the margins.

After over a decade in power, it is unlikely that Karzai will be able to find a way to bolster his popularity enough (say, to the level of Russian President Vladimir Putin in his prime) to avoid a real threat of revolution. Perhaps the candidate he endorses will be highly popular, but it is hard to see how such support could be achieved in short order. If Karzai supports a relative, this may be seen as a corrupt move that exacerbates the problem. One can urge the authorities to avoid fraud and to relinquish power without a fight upon a loss, but post-Soviet (and, indeed, world!) experience does not lend much cause for optimism this will succeed.

The Americans could decide to avoid force reductions in Afghanistan until after the election outcome is established so as not to exacerbate Karzai's lame duck problem, but this may not be seen as credible enough by elites who by now widely expect a diminished U.S. military role. Moreover, post-Soviet experience shows that even the Russians were unable to control succession-related revolutions in regions regarded by many as their own protectorates, as with the revolutions in the Georgian breakaway territories of Abkhazia in 2004-05 and South Ossetia in 2011-12, where Russian-backed

forces lost power (as I show in my book manuscript). A major increase in the already-massive scale of American aid could help, but would likely be seen as too little, too late.

Alternatively, of course, Karzai could attempt somehow to circumvent term limits. It may be too late for this, however. Presumably, the country's major players have already begun making investments in a post-Karzai future that may have momentum of their own, especially since Karzai appears to lack the popular support that efforts to escape from term limits usually need to succeed, if post-Soviet experience is any guide.

More realistic might be the hope that "traditional" practices like a *loya jirga* could be invoked after (or even before) a disputed election as a form of pre-election coordination to resolve the succession struggle while avoiding giving the Taliban an opening to subvert the regime. But so long as the constitution remains strongly presidentialist, it will be hard to make coalitional deals credible because losers will get positions (formal or informal) that are ultimately likely to be seen as vulnerable to presidential whim in the future. Perhaps the best one can hope for would be a *loya jirga* that also coordinates constitutional change to a system that is more conducive to power-sharing, potentially including some move away from presidentialism and/or a form of decentralization. If presidentialism itself cannot be changed, then perhaps a change to limit each president to a single six-year term, something that could give each network more hope that it can have a turn at power later and could limit opportunities for the president to build up the most autocratic features of the political machine, making coalitions of networks more credible.

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