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The Bonn legacy

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BY WILLIAM BYRD | JULY 8, 2013, 7:09 PM

Much has happened in Afghanistan since 2001, and there is heightened uncertainty about the country's political future with the security handover being completed, conflict with the Taliban continuing – despite attempts to begin a reconciliation dialogue in Qatar, the withdrawal of international troops proceeding, and the 2014 presidential election approaching. While the situation on the ground is quite different from when the Bonn Agreement was signed nearly a dozen years ago, the Bonn experience can, to some extent, inform current thinking about Afghanistan's upcoming political transition.

The 2001 Bonn Agreement involved an agreed transfer of power from one nominal head of state, Burhanuddin Rabbani, to another, Hamid Karzai, after the fall of the Taliban regime, and occurred without substantial violent conflict both during the negotiations and over the three-year period covered by the Bonn process. This is exceptional given that leadership changes in Afghanistan during the past century have occurred through assassinations, coups, forced exiles, and, between 1978 and 2001, devastating wars and civil conflict. Since a peaceful transfer of power is also a primary objective of the current political transition, it is worth reviewing several key components of the Bonn experience:

- Bonn was a closed-door negotiation; participants were isolated, outside contact was limited during the negotiations, and there was no publicity until after the agreement was signed.
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- The existing nominal head of state (Rabbani) was sidelined and did not participate, and the Taliban were completely excluded from the Bonn negotiations.
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- The number of participants was limited to 25 signatories, and as a result representation of the various non-Taliban factions was far from complete.

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- At the outset, there was **no obvious candidate to be the new leader**; Rabbani was considered unacceptable by many, including parts of the Northern Alliance to which he belonged; there was strong opposition in some quarters to former ruler Zahir Shah; and Ahmad Shah Massoud, military leader of the Northern Alliance, had recently been assassinated.
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- **An acceptable Pashtun candidate (Karzai), who did not have control over any armed forces, was perceived to be politically weak**, and did not have a problematic background from the 1990s civil war, emerged during several rounds of straw balloting at Bonn, and was selected as the interim head of state.
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- The division of cabinet ministries (seen as "spoils") among factions at Bonn was a key part of the negotiations.
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- The United Nations and several other international actors played major roles in pushing the negotiations forward, and the Bonn Agreement was blessed by the U.N. Security Council.
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- The Bonn Agreement set an **ambitious three-year political and administrative roadmap** which was, by and large, followed: the Emergency Loya Jirga (grand council) of June 2002 established the transitional administration, a new Constitution was ratified in early 2004, and presidential and parliamentary elections were held in 2004 and 2005.

Some possible elements of continuity with the current political transition are evident. Many current Afghan political actors were part of or affected by the Bonn process; fragmented, personalized, factional politics remain extremely important; organized political parties (especially nationally-oriented ones) **remain weak**; there is no obvious candidate for head of state (for the first time in an Afghan presidential election, no incumbent will be on the ballot); and a number of actors – including some members of the "loyal opposition" to the Karzai government – desire to come to a consensus or at least agree on broad parameters in advance of the election. However, the differences are more striking.

First, all aspects of the Bonn Agreement were finalized when it was signed at the meeting, including the choice of interim head of state. A national presidential election is a fundamentally different process.

Second, negotiations at Bonn were kept on-track (and basically not allowed to fail) by heavy international pressure to conclude an agreement quickly and, during the following three years, to ensure timely implementation of the Bonn roadmap.

Although the 2014 presidential election provides an ultimate deadline for any pre-election negotiations, their success is by no means assured.

Third, in 2001, the Afghan government had been devastated by two decades of protracted conflict and did not have any impact on Bonn. Now the government has built up considerable capacity and power, which can be deployed to influence the current political transition.

Fourth, in late 2001, the international community's engagement in Afghanistan had just started and was growing, whereas next year's presidential election will occur alongside the international military disengagement from Afghanistan and declining international financial support.

Fifth, the Taliban – widely regarded as defeated and irrelevant during the Bonn negotiations – are currently seen as an important force in the country, and are being actively courted by the international community in parallel reconciliation efforts, which may distract attention from the political transition; moreover, the Taliban clearly have the capability to be a disruptive force in the upcoming elections.

Based on these major differences as well as elements of continuity, here are some questions to consider as the political transition moves forward:

- Will the 2014/2015 election cycle be the one where Afghanistan's enormous demographic "youth bulge" impacts the country's politics and generational change occurs in the leadership, or will these inevitable changes be delayed until some later time? To the extent that existing political elites and their leaders (who date back to the 1980s and 1990s) remain in power, some aspects of the Bonn experience may be somewhat more relevant to what happens in the current political transition.
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- One scenario for 2014 – broad agreement on a relatively weak consensus candidate who is then "ratified" by the election – might exhibit some similarities to Bonn. But could such a scenario work and be sustained, given that the Bonn process was strongly "anchored" by international sponsorship/endorsement and oversight? Is there anything now that might play a similar role?
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- Does former President Rabbani's role post-Bonn provide any parallels for President Karzai post-2014? After 2001, Rabbani's political power waned and he was somewhat marginalized. Nevertheless, he came to be perceived as a kind of elder statesman, and most recently served as the **head of Afghanistan's High Peace Council** until his assassination in 2011. Despite major differences

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between the two, Rabbani's experience may be relevant because it is an extremely rare case of a former Afghan leader remaining active in the country's political life while not contesting to regain the top position – **Sibghatullah Mujadidi**, who served briefly as president in 1992, and former king **Zahir Shah** (1933-73), who returned to Kabul in 2002 and remained there until his death in 2007, are the only other examples in Afghan history.

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- More generally, will the political institutions created since 2001 play their intended roles, resulting in open, contested, and reasonably fair presidential and parliamentary elections in 2014 and 2015? If so, will the elections bring legitimacy and stability, or will strongly contested (especially if close) elections, even if reasonably fair, overstrain Afghanistan's new institutions and lead to post-election violence?
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- Or will the political culture that has been built over the last 30-plus years, of shifting alliances and back-room deals – evident at Bonn, be more important? If so, will the political transition be managed in a way that avoids outright conflict and brings at least a degree of stability (as during the Bonn process), or will there be a breakdown, possibly into destructive violent conflict (as in the 1990s)?

Thinking about these questions probably tells us more about the mindsets of some actors from the time of Bonn who remain significant political players today than about how the 2014 political transition might actually proceed. While some may be enamored with **behind-the-scenes negotiations**, allocating ministerial and other top positions in advance, and perhaps even hoping for an outside entity to serve as "broker," key factors that made the Bonn process viable and sustained it for three years are no longer present. Whatever may be decided in advance, things could go off-track before, during, or after the 2014 presidential election. Moreover, any agreements reached among various political actors and groupings (sometimes termed a "national agenda") would not necessarily have the internationally-backed force and staying power of the Bonn Agreement. Thus, while there may be similarities to certain features of Bonn, a Bonn-like scenario seems unlikely for the current political transition. Nevertheless, the Bonn experience provides an illuminating counterpoint to weave around and inform thinking about 2014.

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