
The Saffron Revolution of 2018

Without political reform, a never-ending war, and a declining economy, this is how everyone could lose in Afghanistan.

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The revolution began on Afghanistan Victory Day in April 2018.

Since 2001 Afghans surged from the countryside and refugee camps into the capital city, swelling its size to over five million people. Jobs were available. Rags to riches stories of people making their fortunes over international largess provided hope to bright young men and women. Rural flight drained the countryside of those not well-connected to local strongmen.

As international forces declined, non-governmental organizations and foreign businesses fled. The war economy ground to a halt. Unemployment **surged**. Even college graduates could not find jobs. Protests began in early 2018 when people could no longer afford *naan*, the renowned flatbread.

The Afghan government appealed for help, but the aid was never enough. The international community had succumbed to donor fatigue. Despite good intentions to reform, the National Unity Government was too fractured to overcome deep animosities. The United States hatched the extra-constitutional deal between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah. That got the political crisis off of the front page of U.S. newspapers. The United States moved on, and did little to help the agreement work.

Gridlock. Frictions prevented meaningful economic reform. Subtle **threats of violence** were effective blackmail. Self-enrichment was the only political consensus.

The **kleptocracy** that arose under the Karzai government had become too entrenched. The money had been so good and so easy for so long that the power-brokers could not bring themselves to believe the riches would ever end. They squabbled over a shrinking pot, betting that yet another bailout would come. The elites were taking the country over a cliff.

The burst of **China's economic bubble** rippled across the world. The United States and Europe were no longer willing to bankroll an Afghan government that refused to reform. To keep the Afghan army paid the government had to shrink. The layoffs increased unemployment and disaffection.

The war against the **Taliban** continued. Although informal talks had been occurring, the Taliban calculated that their leverage would increase as international forces declined. The United States' decision to extend the drawdown until the end of 2017, to muddle through for another year, simply extended the conflict.

A major civilian casualty incident from a U.S. drone strike was the catalyst that set off large-scale protests across the country. As U.S. presence contracted, warlords found it easier to use military strikes to settle scores with their rivals. "Islamic State Khorasan" (ISK) was the latest bogeyman that played on U.S. fears.

In the Shinwar district of Nangarhar province, a wedding party was struck with a 2,000-pound bomb from a Reaper drone. Pictures of dead women and children went viral.

Afghans had had enough. The combination of grievance, economic crisis, and political inaction was toxic. In Kabul, Kandahar, and nearly all the major cities, Afghans called for an end to U.S. military presence. Violent protests erupted near Bagram Air Base. President Ghani tried to calm the people, but to no avail. The United States evacuated Bagram and the embassy. Other nations soon followed.

Behind the scenes, former President Hamid Karzai had kept his networks intact. The Afghan government's efforts to marginalize warlords and kleptocrats created grievances among the super-rich. They owed their fortunes to Karzai, who ably tapped into their sense of disenfranchisement. As he grew disenchanted and vocal in his opposition, support for him strengthened.

The Karzai network was powerful and developed into a sort of shadow government. It had reach into every province and most districts. Provincial and tribal elites would come to Karzai's office in Kabul to pay their respects. Over time, conversations about grievance grew into conspiracy. People longed for a **return to the Karzai days**, they said. The consummate political leader, Karzai, at first reluctantly, fed their hopes for restoration.

Then the revolution began. Victory Day celebrations turned into mass mobilization.

The Afghan government could no longer pay its bills and salaries. Increasing violence across the country combined with a lack of pay and support to bring about desertions within the Afghan army and police. They returned home to protect their villages and families. Local militias, upon which the government had increasingly outsourced local security, gladly received them. The military was collapsing.

Civil war threatened. **Warlords and militias** had been stockpiling arms and ammunition. Most had remained below-the-radar. Better to preserve combat power and let the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) fight the Taliban.

The collapse of the Afghan National Army and Police created the possibility of Taliban return. That was more than most Afghans could bear. Despite Taliban outreach to the international community and Afghan civil society, their hideous past was too much to overcome. Popular uprisings sapped Taliban strength. Repression backfired. The Taliban were in a death-spiral, too.

First in Kabul, then Kandahar, and elsewhere, mass demonstrations demanded Karzai return to power. Whether these were spontaneous or instigated by Karzai proxies is unknown. The former president appealed for calm, but found himself unable to resist the public adulation.

The Afghan government resigned. The Taliban imploded. Karzai was swept to power in what Afghans called the Saffron Revolution.

Pakistan viewed the developments in Afghanistan with alarm. Karzai had always been hostile to them. They welcomed the Ghani presidency and his overtures for peace. But they overplayed their hand. The double deception of suggesting control over the Taliban while denying their ability to force the latter to reconcile created a crisis of confidence. Vocal Afghans criticized Ghani as a sell-out when Pakistan **delivered nothing**. The Taliban thwarted Pakistani efforts to support negotiations, refusing to be seen as puppets. Not content to have a non-hostile instead of pliant neighbor, Pakistan over-reached and wound up with nothing. Or worse.

Accusations by Pakistan of **Indian machinations** in Afghanistan grew. They began to suspect India had been behind the gridlock in government, the backlash against rapprochement with Pakistan, and had bankrolled the Karzai return to power.

Disgust with the Pakistani government grew in Pashtun areas and in Balochistan. Karzai enthusiasm and U.S. rejectionism led to widespread demonstrations. Banners began to emerge about the return of a Greater Afghanistan.

The United States and others refused to finance the new Karzai regime. This is where the old kleptocracy came in handy. Together the super-rich provided billions in loans to get things going. High unemployment meant plenty of young men and women signed up for jobs in government and the military.

Dizzy with such success and adulation, Karzai saw the unrest in the Pashtun and Baloch areas of Pakistan as an opportunity to right a historic wrong — the Durand Line, just as the Islamic State was doing in Iraq and Syria. He called for his brothers to join him in a renewed Afghanistan that ran east to the Indus River and south to the Indian Ocean.

Afghan forces were mobilizing and moving forward. Pakistani garrisons were under attack. India called for calm but mobilized its troops in the border area. The Pakistan Army took over in a coup. Fearing for their existence, Pakistan detonated tactical nuclear weapons in the Bolan and Khyber passes to block Afghan advances and as a warning to India.

A nuclear war in South Asia had just begun.

What can the United States do to help avoid this scenario?

1. **Promote reforms.** In partnership with the Afghan government, set benchmarks for key political and economic reforms. Tie funding to performance and outcomes. Apply appropriate and coordinated leverage to address resistance.
2. **Assure diplomatic neutrality for Afghanistan.** This is one way Afghanistan should be like Switzerland. Take the air out of the new great game by denying neighboring countries and regional powers controlling influence in Afghanistan. None will be happy, but this arrangement is far better than perpetual instability and a potential regional conflict.
3. **Clarify support.** Agree to an Afghan government request to maintain up to 10,000 international troops and airpower at Bagram Air Base indefinitely in support of the ANSF and to protect Afghan neutrality. Agree to end the presence at the request of the Afghan government. This will prevent militants from massing forces, while also increasing the likelihood that they will view the marginal costs of further military action to take territory as far outweighing the benefits. This is one key to advancing the likelihood of a peace process. The short-term cost to the United States will be far less than a wider conflict. Since all regional countries will benefit economically, consider ways to offset the costs of international military support.
4. **Back a peace process.** As the United States clarifies military support and assists political reforms, the Taliban are more likely to calculate that attempts to further gains are no longer cost effective. Nonetheless, they will not be compelled to surrender. In this low-trust environment a "peace deal" would be disastrous. Support a peace process instead. Suggest both the Afghan government and Taliban senior leadership either not object to, or, preferably, endorse broadly-framed statements of agreement on key issues that emerge from current dialogues. This will help the sides outline a common vision. A proper process will use confidence-building measures to gauge sincerely as talks become more specific. After 36 years of war and counting, expect this process to take a decade or more.

5. Foster greater economic self-reliance. Afghanistan is the largest donor-dependent country on Earth. This is both unsustainable and inexcusable. Encourage the Afghan government to develop and own a sensible approach to economic self-reliance. A peace process that reduces the annual **\$4.1 billion** security expenditures will be an important start. So will reducing kleptocracy and the billions in capital flight. Provide much more robust support to higher education in Afghanistan, to include an Afghan School of Mines.

A fiscal crisis that precipitates a political crisis which unravels the government is the biggest threat to the Afghan state. This problem could open a wide range of scenarios like this one. The emergence of a movement that seeks to create Pashtunistan or to secure terrorist safe haven is another such possibility. Interestingly, the policy recommendations above remain consistent across several potential outcomes.

Pre-mortems like this help clarify potential risks by playing out current trend lines. This effort uncovers policy recommendations that could avoid bad outcomes and advance the likelihood of successful ones. The Saffron Revolution may or may not occur, but the absence of political reform, ongoing political gridlock and fragmentation, a never-ending war, a declining economy, continued malign influence among regional powers, and donor fatigue as troops withdraw are quite likely to spiral and bring about an outcome deeply unsatisfying. The United States should do what it can to alter these dynamics.

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