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Issue Brief

Hekmatyar's Return

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After being in exile for more than two decades, the Hezb-i-Islami leader, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, (a declared terrorist in 2003 for his association with Al-Qaeda)¹ made his first public appearance in Afghanistan's Laghman province on April 29, 2017. Hekmatyar's return to Afghanistan was a result of a peace deal signed with President Ashraf Ghani on September 29, 2016.



The agreement, which is believed to have taken more than six years of negotiations,² is a much needed success for the government of National Unity which stands highly divided on the issue of pursuing peace with the Taliban. Although this is the first major breakthrough for President Ghani, who unlike his predecessor, has succeeded in convincing one of (if not the major) insurgent group to lay down their arms, accept the constitution and become a part of mainstream politics.³

The deal has come at a cost. While Hekmatyar has agreed to accept the constitution, he has also expressed the need for amendments. Similarly, he has questioned the parliamentary system of governance in Afghanistan, stating that it is not appropriate for Afghanistan, and while he not interested in seeking any formal position for himself, he said that the government was “not working”, and that “either Ghani or Abdullah should resign”. In return, the government has declared amnesty for Hekmatyar and members of the Hezb-i-Islami Gulbuddin (HIG), release HIG prisoners, recruit HIG fighters into the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), and provide them with homes. The government has also agreed to provide Hekmatyar an honorary status for his struggle “for peace and freedom of Afghanistan.”⁴

The peace agreement with the Hezb-i-Islami is certainly a ‘political’ victory for Ashraf Ghani. However, he continues to struggle in establishing unity within his government and making any headway in the peace process with the Afghan Taliban. Ghani's government continues to stand highly divided on the issue of the Taliban, and has yet to develop national consensus, a national narrative, as well as a

national reintegration policy. Many within Ghani's fragile administration strongly oppose the inclusion of the Taliban in the political process.⁵

While the deal has raised hopes of the possibility of a negotiated settlement with the Taliban, in the larger context, the deal appears to be more of a 'symbolic' victory as the Hezb-i-Islami has remained largely inactive and low key. Unlike the Taliban, the HIG has not been able to hold its influence which has been reduced significantly. It has not been a part of the insurgency that the Taliban have waged since 2001. In fact, the last attack conducted by the group was back in 2013, in which 15 people were killed.⁶ Hence, while President Ghani may have achieved success with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami, the move has not had a meaningful impact on the Taliban, nor has it convinced the group to abandon its insurgency or enter into talks with Kabul. The Taliban have dismissed the deal, referring to it as a 'political marriage'.⁷ The Taliban have also rejected Hekmatyar's appeal to the Taliban to join the peace process, and have criticized him as "a criminal and a traitor to Islam."⁸

Hekmatyar's return to mainstream politics has been met with a mixed response ranging from optimism to apprehensions. While many of his supporters came out to welcome the former Prime Minister, at the same time, significant numbers protested against the deal. Many continue to hold him responsible for the deaths of thousands during the Afghan civil war in the 1990s as a result of which he attained the title of the 'butcher of Kabul'. Hence, his re-emergence could further exacerbate the 'culture of impunity' granted to numerous warlords and thus deny justice to those that have suffered at the hands of such elements.⁹

President Ghani's optimism that the deal could convince the Taliban to follow in the footsteps of Hekmatyar and enter into a peace deal appear to be naive, as the Taliban appear to have no interest in entering into talks and instead, may discourage the Taliban (who have been at odds with the HIG) from entering into such a pact and further intensify the already existing power struggle in Afghanistan. Despite the loss of two leaders i.e. Mullah Omar and Mansoor, the Taliban have made significant gains in terms of gaining territory, as well as fighting against the ANSF. The ANSF, which exert control over less than 60 percent of Afghanistan, have struggled against the Taliban and have suffered significant casualties.¹⁰ Today, the Taliban are stronger than before which is evident from the fact that they control 33 districts out of Afghanistan's 400, while 116 continue to be contested.¹¹

While the Taliban may not be able to capture power throughout the country, their increasing influence and tactical victories are certainly causes for concern. However, it is for certain that peace in

Afghanistan cannot be achieved on the military field. A political solution is the only solution to end the Afghan crisis which cannot be achieved without establishing peace with the Taliban through constructive engagement and dialogue. Hence, with the surge in violence, initiation of the Taliban's newly announced spring offensive Operation Mansouri, and presence of foreign forces, inconsistency on the part of Kabul to devise a viable national reintegration programme and reach out to the Taliban will continue to stall the chances of a negotiated settlement.

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