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## ***Afghanistan “peace” deal stalls as Kabul rivals are both sworn in as president***

The swearing in Monday of two rival presidents of the US-backed puppet regime in Kabul has upended so-called intra-Afghan talks set to begin today under the terms of the agreement signed at the end of last month between Washington and the Taliban in Doha.

President Ashraf Ghani, who was declared the victor in a September election whose votes were not counted until February, was sworn in at the presidential palace in Kabul. The ceremony was marred by a rocket attack that struck a parking lot in the presidential compound. In attendance were Zalmay Khalilzad, the US special envoy who was the main architect of the US-Taliban deal, as well as Gen. Austin Miller, the commander of US forces in Afghanistan, and Tadamichi Yamamoto, the UN secretary general’s personal representative to Afghanistan.



**Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, center, delivering a speech after he was sworn in at an inauguration ceremony at the presidential palace in Kabul, Afghanistan, Monday (AP Photo/Rahmat Gul)**

Abdullah Abdullah, Ghani's rival in the presidential election, was sworn in at an adjacent palace in front of a crowd that included some of Afghanistan's most prominent warlords. Abdullah, who held the position of "CEO" in Ghani's government—a consolation post devised after the intervention of Secretary of State John Kerry following Afghanistan's last fraud-plagued election—refused to accept the official results of last September's vote, which saw less than a quarter of the country's eligible voters go to the polls.

Khalilzad had carried out a round of shuttle diplomacy between the rival claimants to the presidency, urging them to postpone their dueling inaugurations and attempt to arrive at a settlement. Abdullah said that he had agreed to a three-day delay, but that Ghani rejected the proposal.

A number of Afghan political figures, including former President Hamid Karzai, failed to turn up at either inauguration. And, while the US appeared to throw its support behind Ghani's claim to the presidential palace, Washington has yet to officially acknowledge his alleged victory in last September's election.

The political chaos gripping the Kabul regime, neither of whose factions enjoys any broad base of support, has upended the plans mapped out in the US-Taliban agreement reached in Doha on February 29 to initiate "intra-Afghan" negotiations on March 10. These talks, to be held in Oslo, were supposed to include the Taliban, representatives of the US-backed puppet regime, which the Taliban does not recognize, and other representatives of Afghan society.

The Doha agreement, summarized in a four-page memorandum, calls for a phased withdrawal of US troops, with a drawdown from the present deployment of 13,000 to 8,600 by July and a complete withdrawal within 14 months. In return, the Taliban has pledged to deny the use of Afghan soil by Al Qaeda or any other group that poses a threat to the "security interests" of the US and its allies.

The negotiations began after a seven-day reduction in violence observed by the Taliban and US forces in Afghanistan. Since the talks, there have been dozens of Taliban attacks on checkpoints manned by Afghan security forces and one US airstrike against Taliban fighters. While the Islamist movement made a commitment to halt all attacks on US and NATO-led "coalition" forces, it made no such promise in relation to the Afghan National

Army and police. The Islamist group did apparently agree to halt attacks in Kabul and major provincial capitals.

A Pentagon official, speaking not for attribution to AP, said on Monday that the US troop drawdown had already begun, with hundreds of soldiers departing Afghanistan at the end of their tours and not being replaced.

Even before Monday's dual inaugurations, prospects for intra-Afghan talks going ahead as planned appeared slim at best. President Ghani has insisted that he had not agreed to a provision of the US-Taliban deal that called for the release of 5,000 imprisoned Taliban fighters—roughly half of the total number held by the US and its puppet government—along with 1,000 Afghan troops and police captured by the Taliban.

The Doha deal, describing the prisoner swap as a “confidence-building” measure, called for the exchange to take place before the March 10 opening of the talks between Kabul and the Taliban. A side agreement reached between Washington and the Ghani regime, however, specified only that the “feasibility” of such a prisoner release would be considered.

Ghani has clearly been loath to release the Taliban prisoners. He views them as one of the few bargaining chips in the hands of his regime, which has lost control of more than half the country to the Taliban, which now holds more territory than at any time since the October 2001 US invasion that overthrew the government headed by the Islamist movement.

The US puppet president has suggested over the past week various conditions for the release of the prisoners, which were nowhere mentioned in the deal between the Taliban and Washington. These include that the Taliban fighters “renounce violence” and that the Islamist movement as a whole break all ties with the government of Pakistan, whose military intelligence agency, the ISI, has long provided it protection.

For its part, the Taliban has insisted that it will not hold any talks with the Kabul regime until its prisoners are released.

The farcical dual inaugurations in Kabul Monday were preceded two days earlier by a bloody massacre in the capital's streets, where two gunmen turned automatic weapons on a public gathering called to commemorate the 1995 death at the hands of the Taliban of Abdul Ali Mazari, the leader of a political party and militia based upon the Hazara ethnic group based in the north of Afghanistan.

The shooting spree claimed the lives of at least 32 people, while wounding 81 others. The Islamic State (ISIS) group claimed responsibility for the attack, declaring that it had targeted a “gathering of apostates.” The Hazaras are mainly Shia Muslims.

The massacre provoked angry protests over the failure of the government to provide security, even in the center of the Afghan capital. There were also suggestions that the Ghani regime may have let the attack go forward in the hopes of killing some of its political rivals, including Abdullah, who spoke at the rally.

The crisis in Kabul and the threatened breakdown of the so-called peace deal reached in Doha have their source in the failure of more than 18 years of US war and occupation to create any kind of viable US-backed regime. Instead, a war that has claimed the lives of nearly 2,400 US troops, wounded tens of thousands of others and has cost more than \$1 trillion has succeeded only in facilitating the growth of a kleptocracy that is totally dependent upon US military force and has exploited and oppressed the Afghan people to line its own pockets.

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