



## Who should we call political or partisan opposition in Afghanistan?

By Sayed Maisam Wahidi<sup>1</sup>

In the present political situation, 'opposition' is a new and popular term in the literature of Afghan politics. Opposition manifests itself in divergence of opinions between the government and its people. Sometimes, opposition could appear in a sophisticated and organized political party and sometimes opposition movements flow and become a revolution. In the Afghan political environment, however, an opposition entity has not properly formed. The term 'opposition' can have good or bad connotations, but it is the consequence of political plurality in Afghan society that people express their opinions publicly and criticize the government in the post-Taliban era. More than 80 political parties were registered before the first Parliamentary election in 2005. However, subsequently there was no progression of strong political parties to enhance the people's political participation.

Hence, the experiences of previous elections showed that political parties were not able to influence people's votes based on the political partisanship of the candidates. Political, ethnic and personal characteristics of candidates were far more important to voters in Afghanistan. For instance, even President Karzai was an independent candidate in two presidential elections. While he positioned himself as an independent candidate and some political parties campaigned for him during presidential elections.<sup>2</sup>

The lack of focus on growing political parties and an emphasis on strengthening civil society created barriers for opposition politics to rise in Afghanistan. In general, it seems Afghans are not welcoming the idea of political opposition nor supporting the Afghan government. It is unclear to many Afghans that in a democratic system opposition groups have a serious role in pressuring and influencing an incumbent government's actions. Therefore, the concept of

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<sup>1</sup> Sayed Maisam Wahidi is a Senior Research Analyst at Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies, Kabul, Afghanistan.

<sup>2</sup> NDI. "Political Party Assessment Afghanistan." Spring 2006.



opposition in the current political situation of Afghanistan has not bred adequately fortitudinous opposition groups. Therefore, in order to support this argument, this paper studies three main opposition groups that have been created in the post Taliban era: a) National United Frontline, b) Hope and Change, and c) Green trends.

a) National United Frontline was the first, strong opposition alliance after collapse of Taliban regime and it founded in April, 2007. Most of its members are former Mujahiddin leaders including: Burhanuddin Rabbani, Marshal Qasim Fahim, Ahmad Zia Masood (vice president between 2004-2009), Yunus Qanoni (Speaker of National Assembly during the last parliamentarian period), General Ismael Khan (former minister of Energy and Water), Sayed Mustafa Kazemi (former member of parliament), General Abdul Rashid Dustom, some senior officials from the ex-communist regime, former minister interior during Najubullah regime, Gulabzoi, Oloumi, and some members from Rome group including grandson of the last king, Muhammad Zahir Shah, Mustafa Zaher. The main reason for the creation of the National United Frontline was because its members were exiled from the government. For instance, General Abdul Rashid Dustom did not have any role in government's decision making and it was quite difficult for him, as a leader of Uzbek minorities, who does not have any representative in the cabinet and role in the Karzai administration. President Karzai also did not rely on them when he created his own team within the Afghan government to pursuit his goals during his first presidential period. Yunus Qanoni, the main rival of President Karzai in the first presidential election in 2005 and Speaker of National Assembly was also another strong individual for the United Frontline who was strongly opposing Karzai. Qanoni tried to increase National Assembly power to manipulate the Karzai administration. They publicly declared the fight against corruption and devised necessary actions to maintain security and improve peace and stability in Afghanistan.

The main reason the United Frontline broke down was because it had opposing positions on how to pursue a common interest. The common interest of United Frontline simply was



opposing the Karzai government. Further, its members held quite opposing ideologies and approaches. Additionally, empowering parliament and preparing for the upcoming election was also in their agenda. But the effort was shallow and it proved difficult for them to agree on one candidate and draw a favorable political agenda for the 2009 presidential election. Parliamentarians who were members of National United Frontline had their own agendas that worked against the collective. Therefore, National United Frontline did not last and members started to separate and some of its leaders became allies to President Karzai in the 2009 presidential election. The main actor of United Frontline was Burhanuddin Rabbani who became an ally of Karzai and was appointed as the Head of the High Peace Council in 2010, the main body who was carrying the peace and reconciliation process and assassinated by a supposed peace emissary Taliban Quetta Shura in 20 September, 2011.<sup>3</sup>

- b) During the presidential campaign in 2009, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, the main rival of President Karzai during his presidential election, announced his new coalition called 'Hope and Change' which was created as an opposition to President Karzai's administration. His political agenda was to change the Afghan Constitution in an attempt to replace the executive system with a parliamentary system. He also criticized the Karzai peace process and his foreign policy with appearing to the international and local media and challenging the Karzai government. In the end however he chose not to run for the presidency, hopes and change coalition activities decreased enormously and Dr. Abdullah, as a leader of coalition was hardly visible in the media or among the population. One of the main reasons that Dr. Abdullah is frustrated to have a strong and influential opposition is lack of charismatic leadership that could persuade people and mobilize them in order to march across the country and maneuver its people's support to the government.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Radio Free Europe. "Afghanistan: New Political Bloc Unites Old Adversaries." 05<sup>th</sup> April, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Radio Free Europe. "Abdullah Abdullah: Karzai's Main Challenger." 10 August, 2011.



c) Amrullah Saleh, former Chief of the National Directorate of Security (NDS), after his resignation publicly appeared on media and said that the main reason for his resignation was his disagreement with President Karzai regarding how to deal with Taliban and Pakistan. He launched a new opposition called green trends and became one of the main opposition voices against the Karzai-modeled peace process. Amrullah Saleh, who was a member of Jamiet-e-Islami and close to Ahmad Shah Masood, publicly expressed his anti-Taliban and Pakistani position and opposed his spiritual leader, Burhanuddin Rabbani, Head of the High Peace Council. He led a rally against President Karzai's peace process and deal with Taliban in May 2010. The demonstration was held peacefully and various reports said nearly 10,000 people gathered. However, his position as a leader of the green trends opposition was not able to impact the Karzai peace process. The green trends movement based on Amruallah Saleh's initiatives was not able to gather all the opposition groups or parliamentarians necessary to have a bigger role and present a nationwide strategy to protect civil rights as well as have substantive economic plans to create viable economic futures for the Afghan population.<sup>5</sup>

Constitutionally, Afghanistan has political plurality- a main prerequisite for the application of democracy.<sup>6</sup> However, lack of political knowledge and effective rule of law gave more space for power holders to prevail and prevented successful and widely encompassing political pluralism in Afghanistan. Personal interests of some political holders within the Afghan government would not allow strong political parties to exist in order to remain influential and shape an opposition to control the current situation of Afghanistan. In other words, political holders intend to manage the current crisis in order to gain more power in Afghanistan. For instance, massive corruption within the Afghan government and rising violence and insecurity still remain and there have not been any practical efforts to reduce or fight against these problems.

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<sup>5</sup> Green Howand and Thomas Ruttig. "The Green Trend Mobilisation and a positive new rift in Jamait." Afghanistan Analyst Network (AAN). 15 June, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Afghan constitution, articles 33, 34, and 35 addressed political plurality and freedom of expression to criticize the government publicly.



### **What should an Opposition be in Afghanistan?**

The culture of opposition is not being set in Afghanistan yet. Ideally, a culture of opposition is meant to be peaceful and non-violence. Discontent with government policies and posing a challenge to the government ought to be characterized by a demonstration, rally, lobby, or negotiations. In a democratic society, when an opposition criticizes the government and attempts to rectify government performance they simultaneously act as a helper and partner of the government in order to avoid putting legal barriers on the government. Whilst people are the main victims of a clash between government and opposition they could lose their trust in government and opposition as well.

Therefore, it would be an overstatement to say there is a political opposition movement in Afghanistan. However, a fragmented society itself creates clusters among elites to form an opposition in order to follow the same direction. Therefore, political pluralism with a strengthening political party system is the only way to project an opposition and also shape a strong government. However, the main characteristic of political parties should be nationwide and symbolize all the ethnicities in Afghanistan. Political parties should set a plan to connect and unify different ethnic groups and create strong political partisanship among Afghan citizens so that if an opposition rises from a political party, the opposition already has the population's support to influence the government's decisions.