



Rival Presidential Swearing-In Ceremonies in Afghanistan

As talks with the Taliban loom for Afghanistan's government, the country finds itself in political disarray as two people are sworn in as president. After holding an election nearly five months ago, Afghanistan's electoral commission declared Ashraf Ghani the victor last month, awarding him just over 50% of the votes, enough to avoid a run-off. Ghani is the current incumbent, and his rival, Abdullah Abdullah, declared the results a sham, and himself the victor. Abdullah claimed that Ghani had received "illegal" votes, and the result was "national treason." Accordingly, Abdullah has been proceeding as though he won the election, and held his own swearing-in ceremony simultaneously with Ghani's. The timing of the dispute could not be worse for Afghanistan, as all-Afghan peace talks loom as part of the negotiations to see the United States pull out of Afghanistan.

Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah both held positions in Afghanistan's previous government, and Abdullah was the chief executive of a government brokered by the United States in 2014. This is the third time that Abdullah has been at the center of an election dispute in Afghanistan, with the United States previously mediating a power-sharing agreement between the two men in 2014. Since then, supporters of Abdullah have accused Ghani of failing to share power equally, and the contested election is a result of deep dissatisfaction toward Ghani by Abdullah's supporters. The United States special envoy to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, is currently in Afghanistan attempting to negotiate another power-sharing agreement between the two men, as a split government would have deep ramifications in the intra-Afghan peace talks that were due to begin this week.

The United States and the Taliban signed a peace deal in late February that provided for the withdrawal of all 13,000 American servicemembers in Afghanistan in the next 14 months. Part of the deal rested on all-Afghan peace talks aimed at negotiating a multilateral power-sharing agreement among Afghanistan's many groups. The dispute between Ghani and Abdullah will have an adverse effect on Afghan peace talks, as the two men will not have the same agenda. Ghani has been backed by the international community, evidenced by the presence of Zalmay Khalilzad, NATO commander Scott Miller, and other international representatives at his inauguration. However, Abdullah has strong backing from within Afghanistan, holding the support of numerous strong political figures in Afghanistan.

The intra-Afghan talks have been delayed as a result of the dispute between Ghani and Abdullah, with Zalmay Khalilzad thus far unable to negotiate a settlement between the two. A spokesman for the Taliban said that the current situation was detrimental to the prospect of peace in Afghanistan. Moving forward, Ghani and Abdullah will have to resolve their differences before any real progress is made in securing peace in Afghanistan. Zalmay Khalilzad will be instrumental in facilitating a settlement, and he will likely seek to resolve the crisis urgently.