

Existential Fears in Afghanistan

Author: [Abdol Wahed Faramarz](#)

Local experts say unchecked pressure from neighbours could fracture the state.

As the end date for the NATO combat troop presence approaches, some experts in Afghanistan fear their country will not withstand external pressures and could even disintegrate.

Last month, Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, a former central banker who now heads the commission in charge of the security transition, told a private Afghan TV station that the next ten years would be a massive challenge.

"We face dangers to the survival of our nationhood in 2014," he said in a January 5 interview. "Our neighbours, as well as some international commentators and others who do not hold us in high esteem, are waiting for a collapse."

In January, Afghanistan's former intelligence chief Amrullah Saleh, issued dire predictions about his country's post-2014 future. In interviews for the BBC in English and Pashtu, he warned of immediate threats posed by Pakistan and Iran.

Interviewed by the BBC's Frank Gardner, Saleh said the West would "regret it one day" if it failed to "persuade, pressure or convince Pakistan to give up extremist militancy as tool for promotion of its foreign policy".

For Afghans, he said, the result would be that "a lot of us will be killed, perhaps hundreds of thousands of people displaced. There will be images of an Afghanistan sinking into chaos, an Afghanistan not able to provide services for its population."

Some politicians like parliamentarian Mohammad Hussein Fahimi argue that the influence of both Tehran and Islamabad already extends far inside Afghanistan, into the heart of government. Fahimi told IWPR that this leverage allowed these states to press home their advantage whenever they sensed that the Afghan leadership was vacillating.

Apart from the continuing Taleban insurgency, local analysts point to internal strains within central institutions including government, parliament and the security forces, with many politicians still more attached to old political and ethnic allegiances than to the nation state.

For some, the future is beginning to look alarmingly like the civil war period of the early 1990s.

Abdul Latif Pedram, leader of the National Congress Party, fears a resurgence in warlords reigning over mini-states within Afghanistan and engaging in conflict with neighbouring factions.

"Increasing tribal, ethnic, factional and regional prejudice presents a major risk that our nationhood will be destroyed," he said. "Whenever Afghan politicians, rulers and leaders appear before the media, they mask their true faces behind talk of national unity, and behind claims that the Afghans are one united nation with no ethnic differences among them. But when they return to their homes, they talk of tribe and tribalism, race and racism."

Ghafur Lewal, director of the Afghanistan Centre for Regional Studies, says Afghanistan has faced similar existential crises on three or four occasions over the past century.

Despite the 11-year western presence, Iran and Pakistan have successfully ensconced themselves in the political, economic and cultural spheres and now enjoy what he calls "unlimited influence" in government, which he believes could ultimately lead to the destruction of the Afghan state.

While some argue that the Afghan security forces are now in a position to cope without international support, Lewal sees them as part of the problem - the military is just as weak and prone to collapse as the government.

He draws an analogy with the end of President Najibullah's rule in 1992, when the regular army fell apart and a number of mujahedin factions embarked on years of civil war.

Pedram agreed, saying most recruits joined the security forces because they needed an income, not because they believed in a unitary Afghanistan. That could mean that if circumstances changed, they would simply walk away, leaving no force to defend the state.

The Afghan defence and interior ministries declined to comment on these claims, but a spokesman for

President Hamed Karzai rejected both the warnings of state collapse and the claims that agents of neighbouring states had penetrated the institutions of government.

"There is no doubt that destructive individuals inside and outside Afghanistan are trying to destroy its nationhood, but they are incapable of doing so. It will never happen," spokesman Aimal Faizi told IWPR.

Faizi said the continued presence of international forces beyond the 2014 withdrawal would guarantee Afghanistan's security, and noted in particular the **security pact** with the United States which President Karzai discussed on a recent trip to Washington.

"Once the security document is approved by the two countries, no threat will destroy Afghanistan's nationhood," he said.

Abdol Wahed Faramarz is an IWPR-trained reporter in Kabul.

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