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The Afghanistan Presidential Elections: Dangerous Portends?¹

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Introduction

The Afghanistan Presidential elections, scheduled for 20 August 2009, are interestingly poised. Unfortunately, the adjective ‘interesting’ also has negative connotations as in the traditional Chinese curse, “May you live in interesting times!” The reason is that the election results, far from leading war-ravaged Afghanistan towards peace and stability, may set the stage for further confrontation and increased instability.

This brief looks at three plausible scenarios and how each is expected to contribute to this gloomy forecast. These are i) President Hamid Karzai winning in the first round; ii) no candidate winning a plurality, with the top two candidates, a Pashtun (President Karzai) and a non-Pashtun (Dr Abdullah), squaring off for a runoff; and iii) Dr Abdullah emerging as the top candidate, even if he does not win a plurality of votes in the first round.³

The Current Situation

Before we go into the implications of these potential situations, an assessment of the current situation would help underpin the central theme of this brief.

In order to win the Presidential elections, a candidate must win a clear plurality of votes (50 percent). In the event that no one is able to win outright in the first round, the elections will go to a second round, scheduled for 1 October 2009, and they will be contested by the top two vote-getters in the first round. The preliminary results are expected by the first week of September 2009, with the Independent Elections Commission (IEC) anticipated to formally certify the vote only on 17 September 2009, after the Electoral Complaints Commission has dealt with all complaints of vote rigging, fraud and irregularities.

¹ A detailed background to the Afghanistan Presidential elections is available in the author’s paper on “Presidential Elections in Afghanistan: Unintended Consequences?”, ISAS Insights 73, 1 July 2009 – available at <http://www.isasnus.org/events/insights/74.pdf>.

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³ The author is thankful to a close Afghanistan colleague, who cannot be named at present, for initiating these ideas during their extensive and continuing discussions.

Along with the Presidential elections, simultaneous elections to the 34 Provincial Councils will also take place on 20 August 2009. However, these representative bodies have little relevance in the present governance arrangements. To make matters worse, the scheme of the Provincial Council elections is also highly flawed, with single non-transferable votes treating the whole province as a single electoral district (constituency), with only individuals being allowed to contest and the existence of a no-list system. These deficiencies need to be rectified in the larger interest of inclusion and improved governance.

There are 41 candidates, including two women, contesting the Presidential elections. The incumbent President Karzai's main challengers are the ex-Foreign Minister and official candidate of the opposition United National Front Dr Abdullah; ex-Planning Minister and 'basher' of international non-government organisations (NGO) Ramzan Bashardost; and ex-Finance Minister and favourite of the international community Ashraf Ghani Ahmedzai – the last-named gave up his United States citizenship just before filing his nomination. The others include *Wolesi Jirga's* (Lower House of the National Assembly) Deputy Speaker Mirwais Yasini; Communist-era Defence Minister Shahnawaz Tanai, who later defected to Pakistan after his failed coup attempt; ex-Mujahideen Abdul Salam Rocketi, who is now a member of the *Wolesi Jirga*, and ex-Vice President Hedayat Amin Arsala, who is a well-connected eastern Pashtun from Nangrahar.

While President Karzai is expected to be the leading vote-getter, his ability to win the elections outright in the first round is increasingly being questioned. The Independent Republican Institute (IRI), a United States institution active in Afghanistan, commissioned two surveys in May and in July 2009. Though the IRI numbers may not be accurate, the trends they indicate are more likely to be correct. While President Karzai remains the most popular contestant, he is still short of the 50 percent mark, even though his support has increased from 26 percent to 44 percent. During the 2004 elections, President Karzai won in the first round itself, polling over 55 percent of the votes. On the other hand, the support for Dr Abdullah has dramatically improved from six percent to 26 percent. Bashardost's support has increased from three percent to 10 percent, and Ashraf Ghani's support has doubled to six percent. According to the surveys, 57 percent of the voters had already made up their minds on who they would vote for, while another 32 percent were almost sure that they had decided on their preferred candidate. Critically, 45 percent of the respondents thought that President Karzai would be re-elected regardless of which candidate they were supporting. Clearly, President Karzai has turned the tables on the detractors who were writing his political obituary not so long ago, cleverly dividing the opposition by dangling hopes of office, threats of prosecution, meeting minority demands and taking on the United States on civilian casualties. He has also been helped by the perceived hostility of the Barack Obama administration towards Afghanistan and by the voters' fears of the unknown.

Election Challenges

The effect of insecurity and irregularities, acting singly and jointly, could also have a major bearing on the presidential results. The IEC expects that around seven to ten percent of the polling stations would be dysfunctional and, in some cases, the insurgents would prevent voters from exercising their franchise. On the one hand, individual Taliban commanders have negotiated ceasefire deals with local authorities that would allow elections to proceed, and on the other, some have warned that the fingers of those found marked with the indelible ink associated with voting would be cut off. Unlike most western observers, the Taliban do not see the elections as a 'make or break' opportunity. Until the time of writing, other than one

dramatic suicide bomb blast in Kabul near the North Atlantic Treaty Organization headquarters and a few assassination attempts on certain leading figures, the Taliban have been far less active in disrupting the elections process than expected. However, the insecure conditions prevailing in the south and the east have cast doubts on the voter registration process. Carried out over four stages (October 2008 to February 2009) and covering all 34 provinces, over four million new voters, of which 38 percent were women, were registered. This is in addition to the more than 12 million voters already registered the last time around (2004-05). There is suspiciously a high registration of female voters in the south-east of the country (Paktiya, Khost, Paktika and Ghazni) – it is regarded as the only region where old-style tribalism is still strong and regarded as most conservative.

According to a report in the New York Times, a well-regarded NGO, Fair and Free Elections Foundation of Afghanistan, found that in the registration centres it monitored, about 20 percent of the cards were issued to underage boys and another 20 percent were duplicate cards. These would reflect not just corrupt practices but also the relative inability of the Afghanistan state to carry out routine administrative functions.⁴ A number of observers have estimated that around three million voting cards of the 17 million floating around are duplicates. Since voters are not attached to specific polling stations and can vote anywhere in the province, multiple voting using duplicate cards is relatively easy. Adding to the suspicion of unfair elections are reports of large scale buying of voter cards and the use of government staff for electioneering purposes. There will be a large number of independent Afghanistan and international observers during the elections but the logistical challenge of the country, insecurity and even language difficulties would pose considerable problems in ensuring free and fair elections in the best of times.

This combination of political, security and weak institutional arrangements means that whatever the outcome of the elections, they are bound to be challenged not only by the defeated candidates but also by neutral observers. This is the essential background that underpins expectations that the elections are likely to lead to increased insecurity in the country, at least in the short run.

The Three Scenarios

If President Karzai wins the first round decisively, a repetition of the Teheran demonstrations cannot be ruled out, challenging not just the credibility of the government but even its legitimacy. Other than in Kandahar and Jalalabad, President Karzai is relatively weak in the non-Pashtun dominated major urban areas of Kabul, Mazar and Hirat, as well as in most of the north and east of the country. The Hazara-dominated Central Highlands (Bamiyan, Daykundi and parts of Ghazni and Uruzgan), which are the most peaceful parts of the country may go along with President Karzai, as their top leadership has endorsed him, but these areas are remote, lightly populated and dispersed. Worse, it would further convince the non-Pashtun, Farsi-speaking Sunnis and not just the Tajiks, that they would always be excluded from power. This would improve Iran's standing among them and make the opposition less amenable to allowing the government to negotiate with sections of the Taliban that may be agreeable to joining the political mainstream.⁵

⁴ The last elections in 2004 (Presidential) and 2005 (National Assembly and Provincial Councils) were conducted by the international community. This time around, it is the Afghans who are doing it, but with extensive logistical support of the international partners.

⁵ The Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance, particularly the Panjsheris of Ahmad Shah Masoud's Shura-I Nazar-Shomali, had a disproportionate share of the government in the period immediately following the

In the second scenario, ethnic tension, which has been quite muted until now, is likely to strain the national fabric in the event of the elections going to the second round with President Karzai and Dr Abdullah as the top two candidates. This would be the consequence of political mobilisation on purely ethnic lines. Despite the years of war and ethnic-base rule (of the Taliban), there have been no demands for either secession or changing Afghanistan's borders despite ethnic linkages across the northern borders with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. However, a close fight between President Karzai and Dr Abdullah, despite the latter's father being a Pashtun from Kandahar, would lead to deep polarisation between the Pashtuns and the main minorities, especially the Farsi-speaking Sunnis, potentially strengthening the de facto role of the Taliban as the protector of Pashtun interests.

The third scenario of Dr Abdullah polling more votes than President Karzai, unlikely as it is to be, would only exacerbate ethnic tensions mentioned above. However, if the Taliban are able to seriously disrupt voting in the Pashtun areas, then this possibility and its dangerous consequences cannot be ruled out. Insurgencies often welcome the victory in elections of those most opposed to them on the grounds that this would shore up support for the former among its target group. In Sri Lanka, Prabhakaran's enforced boycott in the Tamil areas of the north and east during the last Presidential elections to the defeat of the moderate Ranil Wikremasinghe, who favoured talks with the Liberation of Tamil Tigers of Eelam, is a case in point. The consequences of this are too well-known to be repeated here.

Conclusion

The forthcoming elections, while very important in determining how Afghanistan would move ahead on trying to establish conditions for peace, stability and economic development, is not likely to lead to positive developments in the short run. In fact, it is likely to lead to increased insecurity, resulting from heightened ethnic tensions. Nevertheless, the elections have the potential of forcing the Afghanistan elite and its international supporters to think differently of the nature and structure of the Afghanistan state, one in which the citizens, local communities and what a prominent Afghanistan scholar has called 'micro-societies', would form the pyramid on which an inclusive state could be created, and where the election of one individual, at whatever level, does not seriously impact the stability of the system.

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overthrow of the Taliban, but over the years have been considerably marginalised, replaced significantly by members of the hard-line Hizb-i-Islami of Gulbudin Hekmatyar.