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Afghanistan Presidential Elections 2009: The Run-up to the Run-off

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Abstract

In my fourth brief on Afghanistan's presidential elections held on 20 August 2009, I explore the consequences of the findings by the independent, United Nations-managed Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) about the irregularities committed in the elections. The ECC's revised tally of votes gives President Hamid Karzai less than 50 percent of the total. Its findings were accepted by the Karzai government under pressure from the West, in particular the United States, Britain and France. As a result, 7 November 2009 has been set as the date of the run-off election between Karzai and Dr Abdullah Abdullah, Minister of Foreign Affairs in an earlier Karzai administration. The findings were anticipated but they have complicated the United States' mission in Afghanistan. They have come at a time when the administration of President Barack Obama is reviewing Washington's strategy, not only in the country but also in the region the policymakers called 'AfPak' – Afghanistan and Pakistan. The prospect of another election has created even more uncertainty and has coincided with an intensive campaign of terror by Islamic insurgents across the border in Pakistan. The Pakistani government has responded with a full-fledged military assault on South Waziristan that started on 17 October 2009. It is clear that what happens in one country will profoundly impact on the other.

The Run-up to the Run-off

On 16 October 2009, the United Nations-backed ECC issued its findings about the alleged fraudulent ballots in Afghanistan's troubled presidential elections of 20 August 2009.² The Independent Election Commission, in spite of its name, was responsive to the government and gave Karzai 54.6 percent of the total vote and Dr Abdullah, his main rival, 28 percent. The ECC, following petitions lodged by Dr Abdullah and evaluation done on the basis of a

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² These elections were the subject of inquiry by me in two earlier ISAS Briefs. See Shahid Javed Burki, "Afghanistan Presidential Elections 2009: Developments since the Fall of the Taliban", Brief No. 123, 17 August 2009 (accessed at <http://www.isas.nus.org/events/backgroundbriefs/124.pdf>), and Shahid Javed Burki, "Afghanistan Elections 2009: The Day of Reckoning", ISAS Brief No. 126, 31 August 2009 (accessed at <http://www.isas.nus.org/events/backgroundbriefs/127.pdf>).

sampling of the contested vote, determined Karzai's portion of the vote at 49 percent. Since the constitution prescribes a run-off vote in case none of the candidates received a majority of the cast votes, it became clear that the Afghan population would have to go back to the polling stations again. The Karzai administration had anticipated such an outcome. A couple of days before the ECC made known its findings, it was revealed that preparations had begun to hold the run-off election. The run-off election was ordered to be held on 7 November 2009.

Anticipating that a run-off was the most likely consequence of the investigation by the ECC, the Karzai administration began to accommodate itself to the change in its circumstances. Said Tayeb Jawad, Afghanistan's Ambassador to the United States, addressed the developing situation faced by Kabul. In a speech at the United States Institute of Peace in Washington, the Ambassador said that a second round of election was likely but that it would be impossible to hold a run-off within two weeks of certification as required by the constitution. However, "to delay until spring is a recipe for disaster", adding that a new vote will have to be held within a month to avoid prolonging the uncertainty. Some other members of the Karzai administration seemed less inclined to accept the ECC's verdict. Afghanistan's Foreign Minister Rangin Dafdar Spanta said in an interview that a run-off would cause problems for his country. "How can the second round be desirable for Afghanistan?", he asked. "The international community loses security forces, we lose our security forces, we have to spend a significant volume of money. The security situation will be worse." Karzai had stated earlier that he had little confidence in the work of the ECC and that it was under the influence of foreign powers interested in their own objectives and not concerned about Afghanistan's long-term development.

There was a view that an understanding should be reached between the two contending parties before the run-off vote was held. To this end, Zalmay Khalilzad, former United States Ambassador to Afghanistan and an Afghan by birth, arrived in Kabul on 14 October 2009 "and has been speaking to both candidates in an attempt to find a way out of the impasse...But even with a deal, the fraud-scarred polls are likely to damage the Afghan government's credibility. In a country where support for the regime is already low amid accusations of rampant corruption and abuses of power, such credibility is already in short supply."³ Although Khalilzad was joined in his efforts by Senator John Kerry, Chairman of the United States Senate's Foreign Relations Committee, and the French Foreign Minister, there was no indication from Kabul that the two opposing sides were prepared to work together.

These doubts notwithstanding, the international community concluded that it needed a government in Kabul that is seen as legitimate by most of the population. That would not be the case if the elections of 20 August 2009 were allowed to stand and were to be the basis of a new tenure for Karzai and his associates. Not only is another round of election desirable, it also has to be conducted with greater attention paid to fairness and openness.

The United States and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization partners agreed in September 2009 that if there were to be a run-off, it would have to be held by the first week of November 2009 to avoid a turnout that would almost certainly be low because of the harsh winter in most regions of the country. According to one report, "ballots listing both Karzai and his closest challenger, Abdullah Abdullah, and printed in London in anticipation of a run-

³ Anand Gopal and Jay Solomon, "Runoff called more likely in Afghan vote", *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 October 2009, p. A6.

off, have arrived at the United Nations mission in Kabul...while indelible ink is on hand and polling station kits are expected to be packed for distribution this week.”⁴

In addition to the poor weather, security will be a big issue for the next round of elections. While General Stanley McChrystal, the top American commander in Afghanistan, said that his forces had begun preparations for providing protection during the vote, he was conscious of the fact that this would deflect him from his main mission. What that mission is remained uncertain as President Obama and his team of advisors continue to debate the various aspects of the developing situations in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The United States’ Evolving Strategy

Even after a prolonged debate and deliberation, the Obama administration has not decided on its policy stance with respect to the AfPak region. The President had already held five meetings by the time the United Nations-supervised ECC in Kabul issued its verdict. There was intensive debate within the administration about the options being considered. The military, including General McChrystal, backed the counter-insurgency approach that would expel the insurgents by the use of force, hold the areas cleared of the enemy and protect the local population. This strategy would require the dispatch of additional troops to the field. It was well known that General McChrystal had asked for an additional 40,000 troops that would bring the number of men and women in uniform from the United States serving in Afghanistan to over 100,000. United States’ Secretary of States Hillary Clinton supported this approach while Defense Secretary Robert Gates seemed inclined to go down that route as well. General McChrystal warned that the United States could fail in Afghanistan if it does not quickly adopt his proposed strategy.

The other approach has the strong backing of Vice-President Joseph Biden whose influence on policymaking has increased in recent months.⁵ This was a narrow counter-terror approach that would aim to kill or capture individual militants, especially those playing leadership roles. This approach would not require a large build-up in the size of the American contingent already in place in the country. Vice-President Biden wanted a much larger concentration of American resources on Pakistan which was where, in his view and that of many others in the administration, the real problem was located. The Bill that he had initially sponsored when he headed the Foreign Relations Committee in the Senate to provide high levels of sustained economic support to Pakistan was eventually passed under the stewardship of Senator John Kerry, his successor as Chairman. The bill was signed into law by President Barack Obama on 13 October 2009.

A third approach gained some traction as the discussions proceeded within the United States administration. Democratic Senator Carl Levin, Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, emerged as a pivotal player in the debate. His proposal was directed at speeding the training of Afghan security forces, bringing them to a total of 400,000. To take the Afghan force to that size would need the deployment of 10,000 to 15,000 new troops earmarked specifically for an expanded training mission. “You can talk to people who believe in counter-insurgency, counter-terrorism, a blend of the two, a fourth approach, and every single one says build up the Afghan army faster”, Senator Levin told *The Wall Street Journal*. “It is a common

⁴ Karen DeYoung and Joshua Partlow, “Runoff expected in Afghan election”, *The Washington Post*, 16 October 2009, pp. A1 and A14.

⁵ *Newsweek* put the Vice President on the cover of its 12 October 2009 issue.

thread”.⁶ Many of the United States’ key allies are also calling for devoting more attention to the Afghan security forces. Gordon Brown, British Prime Minister, told the Parliament on 14 October 2009 that his country would set up a new centre that would train around 900 junior officers each month as part of a broader move toward “Afghanisation”.

The approach being followed by the Obama administration was very different from the one pursued by President George W. Bush, his predecessor. The new administration was much more open about the content of the debate. The public was being kept fully informed about the meetings that were held in the White House and the issues that were being discussed. The Bush White House had taken most of its “war decisions” in great secrecy. The Obama administration had come to the conclusion that it was politically wise to send the message out to an increasingly skeptical populace that any action which was to be taken was based on careful review by a large number of people who were well informed about the situation in the region, as well as with the experience of the United States in other conflicts in which it had participated since the Second World War.

A well-timed analysis of the decision-making during the years of President John Kennedy and President Lyndon Johnson was published by *The New York Times* in its widely read Sunday Opinion section as the debate in the Obama White House was reaching the decision point. According to this, while Kennedy viewed the advice he got from his military advisors with considerable skepticism, Johnson was much more receptive to what he heard from the senior men in uniform. According to Gordon M. Goldstein, the author of “Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam”, in 1961, a few months after he had assumed office, “Kennedy was shocked by the half-baked recommendations of his generals to use tactical nuclear weapons against the communist Pathet Lao movement in Laos, a proposal he decisively dismissed. In this context, Kennedy was deeply skeptical when his most senior advisers argued in the fall of 1961 that only a substantial numbers of American forces could prevent the collapse of the government of South Vietnam. Kennedy, nonetheless, rejected the deployment of combat troops. However, he also rejected the notion of abandoning Saigon. Instead, he chose to chart a middle course.” Johnson, on the other hand, listened to the hawks in his administration and “combat forces soon poured in, approved and progressively enlarged with staggering speed.”⁷ It was clear what the liberal media in the United States was counselling President Barack Obama as he approached his moment of decision. The next phase in the Afghan conflict and America’s involvement in it will begin not only with the Obama decision with respect to the level of troops deployed by the United States in the country but also with the holding of the run-off election on 7 November 2009.

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⁶ Yochi J. Dreazen, “Sen. Levin crafts Afghan compromise”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 October 2009, p. A6.

⁷ Gordon M. Goldstein, “From defeat, lessons in victory”, *The New York Times, Sunday Opinion*, 18 October 2009, p. 9.