

ISAS Brief

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The Afghan Election: A New Beginning?

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The third election under the current Afghan Constitution was held on 5 April 2014. The question most often asked reflected nervousness on the part of both the Afghan administration as well as the Western powers that had a deep concern over the final outcome of the poll. Were the needed lessons learned from the 2009 election which was widely believed to have been rigged in favour of the incumbent President, Hamid Karzai? This time there was anxiety not only about the security situation but also about the logistics involved. The list of voters was initially developed

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in 2004, the first presidential election held under the new Constitution. For 2009 and 2014, the original list was simply topped up by adding the names of those who had become eligible voters in the meantime. “The authorities estimate that there were as many as 20 million valid registration cards before the start of the top-up exercise,” one Western diplomat was quoted as saying. “That does not include the rumoured or surmised up to 5 million voter-registration cards that had been forged in Pakistan and Iran during the 2004-2005 cycle”. There were rumours that forged cards were being sold in the market at between US\$ 2 and US\$ 5 per piece.²

The National Election Commission had received financial help as well as advice from a number of Western sources. All but US\$ 2.5 million of the US\$ 129 million spent on conducting the latest election came from the donor community. This was deployed in a number of ways, not just on staffing and equipping near 7,200 polling stations. The Commission also issued accreditation to more than 10,000 domestic observers and recognised 250,000 candidate agents. All this preparation notwithstanding, the election was at risk from what an analyst termed a “poignant phenomenon: a failure to deal with the enthusiasm of voters to take part in what has turned into a genuine contest for the future of the country by seeking to escape decades of conflict”.³

This was the first time that Hamid Karzai was not in the field as a candidate although the President was involved in manoeuvres aimed at retaining his influence in the country even after his formal departure from the presidential palace. Working diligently behind the scenes, he had narrowed the field down to three candidates he believed would be prepared to let him continue to play a role after leaving office. The real contest involved the persons who, at different times, had worked with the President. Of the eight that participated in the poll the three favoured by the President included Zalmay Rassoul, a French educated physician and former National Security Advisor and former Foreign Minister; Ashraf Ghani, an anthropologist with a PhD from Columbia University who had worked at the World Bank and was Finance Minister in the first administration headed by President Karzai; and Abdullah Abdullah who had faced Karzai in the 2009 election. Two of these candidates were reported to have received money from a slush fund Karzai kept in his office. He was reported to have given tens of thousands of dollars to Rassoul

² Michael Peel, “Voter enthusiasm deals a wild card in Afghan poll that tests the west’s nerves”, *Financial Times*, April 4, 2014, pp. 1 and 2. This is also the source of the quote from the Western diplomat.

³ *Ibid.*

and Ghani to help them with their campaigns.⁴ The President also convinced two of his favoured candidates – Ghani and Rassoul – to pick the people he liked as their running mates. The choice made by Ghani was the most controversial one. His running mate is Abdurrashid Dostum, an Uzbek warlord, who was expected to garner the support of his ethnic group for the ticket. For Ghani to have chosen Dostum was particularly surprising since he had once described him as a murderer.

Those watching the election as observers were relieved that the Taliban’s threat to use violence did not materialise to the extent expected and feared. The election received wide coverage in the foreign press. A report in *The Washington Post* noted that “conducted under armed guard, the country’s third presidential election since the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001 unfolded without the large-scale attacks or major disruptions that many Afghans had feared, although scores of minor attacks were reported”.⁵ According to another assessment, this one from *The New York Times*, high voter-turnout, estimated by several election officials to be between 60 to 65 per cent of the total, “would represent a sharp public repudiation of the Taliban which had pledged to disrupt the election and had warned Afghans to stay away from the polls. Though the insurgents did manage a number of high profile attacks in the weeks before the election – striking a voter registration center, the election commission headquarters and Kabul’s only luxury hotel among other targets – preliminary tallies indicated that millions of Afghans ignored those threats and that the limited violence on Election Day did not keep people from voting”.⁶ The high voter-turnout was estimated to be twice the proportion of the electorate that voted in the 2009 elections. Then only 38 per cent of the registered voters went to the polls. In 2014, early indications suggested that 7.5 million ballots were cast out of the 12 million registered to vote.

The election not only generated greater confidence in the fledging Afghan political system but also provided an opportunity for the Afghan forces to prove their mettle. “... the Afghan military exulted in having done its job. U.S. military officials were instructed to remain invisible

⁴ Mathew Rosenberg, “Karzai is trying to keep his sway after term ends”, *The New York Times*, April 4, 2014, pp. A1 and A9.

⁵ Joshua Partlow and Kevin Sieff, “Defying Taliban, Afghans go to polls”, *The Washington Post*, April 6, 2014, pp. A1 and A17.

⁶ Matthew Rosenberg and Jawad Sukhanyar, “Early tallies indicating high Afghan vote a success”, *The New York Times*, April 7, 2014, p. A4.

Saturday [the Election Day] – far from the polls and from combat operations – to ensure that the election appeared ‘Afghan owned’”.⁷

Only time will tell whether the 2014 election has bridged the many divides that have made it difficult to manage the country politically. Readings from some of the results posted by the election officials suggest that at least three divisions in the Afghan society will persist in spite of the efforts made by the three leading candidates to present themselves as Afghans rather than as the leaders of groups. The groups are based on ethnicity, religious sect and the developing urban-rural gap. Abdullah Abdullah, a Tajik, had travelled to Kandahar province, the Pashtun heartland, and said he had addressed the people who came to his rallies as an Afghan, not as a member of a different ethnic group. But as one observer saw, “early returns in Kabul pointed to the enduring power of ethnic politics. The presidential candidates had tried to market themselves as post-ethnic leaders, promoting economic and political reform rather than the kind of sectarianism that fed the civil war in the 1990s. An electoral result that breaks down along ethnic lines could complicate the formation of the next government, requiring negotiations and compromises to create a broad-based coalition”.⁸

It is unlikely that one election, which in many ways was historic, would turn back centuries of divisions that have marked the Afghan society. The election was historic in that it set the stage for the first peaceful transfer of power in a country in which most kings and presidents had died from violence. Whether the 2014 election would help to overcome these divisions will depend on a number of factors that include the shape of the country when the Americans leave it; the willingness of different religious sects to resolve their differences through the use of political processes rather than violence; the ability of the vastly expanded Afghan security forces to bring under control the dozens of ethnic militias, some of which were created by the Americans to counter the growing influence of the Taliban; and the closing of the rural-urban divide that has appeared in recent years. The last of these divisions was widened by the way the Americans and their NATO allies fought the 13-year long war. The strategy was to pacify the main urban centres, leaving a good part of the countryside under the influence of the insurgent Taliban.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Kevin Sieff, “Afghan voters cling to loyalties,” *The Washington Post*, April 7, 2014, pp. A1 and A8.

There was consensus among the analysts that the latest poll would not result in the outright victory of any of the candidates. The Constitution prescribes a second round vote if none of the candidates receive more than 50 per cent of the votes cast. The three front-runners were working on challenging the validity of thousands of votes cast; these will have to be looked into before the Election Commission can determine the final result. That will take several weeks and this poses a constitutional problem. President Karzai's term is set to expire on 31 May and there is no provision in the country's basic law for either extending his term in office until the final result is announced or to appoint an interim head of state. It appears that the April election may end up in creating some constitutional problems which the country does not have the experience or institutional capacity to resolve.

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