

WebMemo



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Afghan Elections Offer Hope for the Future

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Yesterday's presidential elections in Afghanistan went relatively smoothly despite sporadic Taliban attacks aimed at disrupting the vote. There was no large-scale dramatic attack as many Afghan and U.S. officials feared. While voter turnout appears to have been respectable, it was lower than in the last election, especially in southern areas, where the Taliban is strongest and best-positioned to make good on their threats to kill or maim Afghans who dared to cast a vote.

The holding of the election is a blow to the Taliban, since it demonstrates that Afghans support the democratic process and not the Taliban's version of harsh Islamist rule. But unless the new Afghan government reins in corruption and establishes effective, inclusive governance throughout the nation, the Taliban will quickly re-gain the initiative. The U.S. and coalition forces must assist the new Afghan government in ousting the Taliban from its strongholds, especially in the south, while ultimately relying on Afghan authorities to lead the rebuilding of their nation.

The election results will not be known for several days, and a runoff between the top two candidates may be necessary if no single candidate receives more than 50 percent of the vote. If a run-off is required, it would prolong the period of uncertainty, thus raising the potential for more Taliban violence and intimidation. On the other hand, if no candidate receives 50 percent of the vote in the first round of elections, it could bolster the Afghans' faith in the democratic process by demonstrating it was a genuinely competitive campaign.

Taliban Threats Could Backfire. On election day, Taliban terrorist attacks claimed the lives of at least 26 people. According to the Afghan Ministry of Defense, there were 135 violent incidents, including two suicide bombings. There were at least five bombings reported in the capital, Kabul, as well as rocket attacks in Kandahar and Khost, two hotbeds of Taliban support.

The Taliban had mounted a fierce propaganda campaign to dampen voter turnout by threatening to attack polling places and punish Afghans who voted with death or disfigurement. In addition to threatening to cut off the noses or ears of Afghans who exercised their right to vote, Taliban propagandists also threatened to chop off fingers stained with the indelible ink that was applied to voters to prevent them from casting more than one vote.

The Taliban's threats, however, could backfire. While perhaps deterring voters on election day, the threats to cut off body parts expose the Taliban's desperation and the fact that it has only fear and intimidation to offer the people. Having to resort to such severe intimidation demonstrates that the Taliban is not winning the battle for the hearts and minds of the people. There also is a growing perception among many Afghans that the attacks are being directed from outside the coun-

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try (i.e. Taliban leaders located in Pakistan), while the Afghan government was able to convince some local insurgents to lay down their guns and participate in the election process.

Chance of Runoff Election. Although the official election results will not be announced until September, as expected President Hamid Karzai appears to be the frontrunner in a field of more than 30 candidates. Opinion polls indicated that Karzai can count on the votes of about 45 percent of Afghan voters. In addition to broad support from his own Pashtun ethnic group, the largest sub-national group in Afghanistan, Karzai has cultivated the political support of Afghanistan's other major ethnic groups by cutting deals with regional power-brokers and warlords.

One of his running mates, former Defense Minister Mohammed Fahim, is a Tajik, while another, Karim Khalili, is a member of the Hazara ethnic group. Karzai has also reached out to the Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum, who returned from exile in Turkey on August 16 to throw his support behind Karzai. All of these political allies draw support from constituencies in northern Afghanistan, while Karzai himself is more popular in the Pashtun-dominated south.

Karzai's leading challenger for the presidency is Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, his former foreign minister, who, according to recent polls, has attracted the support of about 25 percent of Afghans. Abdullah was a key lieutenant of Ahmed Shah Massoud, the charismatic political and military leader who played a critical role in the fight against the Soviet army and later the Taliban before being assassinated by al-Qaeda suicide bombers shortly before the September 11 attacks.

Abdullah, trained as an ophthalmologist, is an urbane reformer who has campaigned against corruption and for a decentralization of power, which would boost the role of governors, mayors, and local administrators, whom he believes should be elected rather than appointed by the President. The son of a Pashtun father and a Tajik mother, he draws the bulk of his support from Afghanistan's Tajik community.

Two other presidential candidates also are likely to influence the election results, especially if a sec-

ond round of voting is required. Ramazan Barshardost, an independent member of the National Assembly, ran a populist, clean-government campaign from a tent pitched in Kabul. An ethnic Hazara who was educated in France, he has surprised some observers by garnering the support of about 10 percent of voters in a recent poll. Ashraf Ghani, a cerebral technocratic reformer who was formerly a key aide to Karzai, an official at the World Bank, and an academic, is running fourth with the support of about 6 percent of the electorate, according to the most recent opinion poll.

In the 2004 elections, Karzai was elected President with about 55 percent of the votes. This time around, it will be more difficult for him to win in the first round of voting, which would require garnering more than 50 percent of the vote, because the turnout in southern Afghanistan, his primary base of support, has been dampened by the Taliban's intimidation campaign. Although Karzai would be favored to win in the second round, it could become a close race if Abdullah picks up the support of the challengers knocked out in the first round.

While most media attention focused on the outcome of the presidential campaign, the elections also involved more than 3,000 candidates competing for 420 seats in provincial councils. The outcome of these races will determine the composition of the councils and exert a strong influence on the development of local politics. The provincial elections could ultimately help to decentralize political power and encourage popular participation in decision making, which could advance efforts to stabilize Afghanistan through a bottom-up strategy.

Major Milestone. The elections mark an important milestone in Afghanistan's evolving democratic politics that could help stabilize the war-torn country. But elections alone do not guarantee that Afghanistan will become a genuine democracy, let alone a stable country. Rather, the success of Afghan democracy will be largely determined by the extent to which Afghanistan's leaders can effectively cooperate after the elections to build a more peaceful and prosperous future.

The U.S.'s stake in these elections is high: America will not be able to help stabilize Afghanistan and ensure it does not again turn into a terrorist safe

haven unless it has an Afghan government partner with credibility among the people. The U.S. and coalition forces, partnering closely with the Afghan forces, should focus on ousting the Taliban from their strongholds in the south, even if this requires sending additional U.S. troops to the region. It is then up to the Afghan authorities to take the lead in establishing effective governance and delivering services to the people in these areas. It is possible to turn the tables on the Taliban. But this will require both resources and firm commitment from the inter-

national community as well as credible and inclusive governance from the Afghan authorities. Yesterday's election was a step in the right direction.

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