Observations of the 2009 Afghan Elections

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In Kabul, the last few days of press conferences have seemed to indicate Afghans’ vigorous engagement and concern for the elections. This morning, animated journalists represented at least ten different media outlets at the Independent Electoral Commission’s (IEC) press conference.

This media is closely watched by citizens in Kabul. The young Afghan translators hired by Democracy International (DI) told me that while few people they know have regular access to internet, their families – and most families they know – regularly watch TV and listen to radio broadcasts of elections news. According to Tolo TV’s founder Saad Mohseni, ten million Afghans watched the first presidential debate in the nation’s history.

With two suicide bombings and Presidential Palace rocket blasts in only the last two days, as well as charges of election fraud such as proxy voting and multiple voting, this strong media coverage of the elections comes as a necessary source of hope for a number of reasons.

First, the coverage shows the participation of young Afghans in the elections. Tolo TV’s recent popular show, “The Candidate,” featured young candidates sparring in a mock Afghan election reality TV show. And in our Democracy International interview with Mr. Sami Pana, the representative of Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, Pana reported that the youth vote is the key constituency in large cities and will have a large impact on final results. Most of DI’s Afghan translators, many who have recently turned 18, tell us they have received their voter registration card and will be voting tomorrow for the first time.

Second, the media coverage has also emphasized that up to 7,000 voting centers will be open tomorrow, a significant increase from the 5,000 voting centers that were open in the 2004 presidential elections. There are technical improvements from the last presidential elections, even if security conditions are more challenging.

Finally, most encouraging to me, this coverage shows that substantive issues are being debated by Afghans: whether women’s democratic participation is properly ensured in the current electoral system, whether a truly level playing field can be guaranteed by current electoral procedures, whether the government should move from a presidential to a parliamentary system.
This debate indicates that the election tomorrow goes beyond symbols – it delves into discussion of government systems and political reform.

It is true that I am commenting on this media coverage and civic interest from the more cosmopolitan capital of Kabul. Farmers in the rural villages of the country may find fewer opportunities for civic participation (and almost definitely no slot in Tolo TV’s reality TV show).

It may also be true that strong media coverage can spur panic and deter voters should there be suicide attacks on the day of the elections. The government of Afghanistan has banned media coverage of any violence tomorrow, for fear of this coverage causing panic and deterring more voters. But reporters are resisting in the name of freedom of the press, a hard-won right since the fall of the Taliban.

And it may be true that an engaged young population is more likely resort to violence if results do not “turn out their way.” But both Dr. Abdullah’s and Mr. Karzai’s representatives have emphasized that their campaigns stress that the Afghan people should not resort to violence.

A strong media may not be the case throughout Afghanistan and may create challenges. But this media coverage shows an engaged Afghan youth, some technical improvements in voting procedure and most importantly, thoughtful concern with substantive issues. This concern is the root of any positive political reform. Perhaps as Mohseni told the Democracy International team on Monday, a real success of the 2009 elections has already been achieved: many Afghans are interested. This forms my strongest hope for tomorrow, that this interest translates to actualized, smooth voting.

August 22, 2009

For my first election voting center observation on August 20, our security team, which was in charge of our movements for the day, chose a voting center on the outskirts of Kabul. The village looked very rural with small mud houses, no plumbing, and no sanitation system. Sadullah, our translator, explained that this area’s residents were of mixed economic statuses – wealthy, poor, “average.” The village appeared friendly to our uncomfortably noticeable SUVs driving through their streets. One young boy called out to Shaun, our security charge sitting at the front, “Thank You!” in English. At the polling center, the polling station officials welcomed us politely.

Sadullah took the opportunity to vote for the first time as he had just recently turned 18. His voting served as a test for how well the polling stations officials knew their procedures. The five stages of voting ran smoothly: the check of the voter registration card; the inking of the finger; the folded and stamped ballots – green for the presidential vote, brown for the provincial vote; voting behind the booths; and then casting the ballot into the sealed ballot boxes. The only problem was that the triangle hole-punch (for indicating on the voter registration card that the person had voted) was not functioning. This was something that was happening throughout the country. The polling station officials had to improvise and use scissors to cut out a corner of the card instead.
At the polling stations for men, there was one candidate agent observing for Mr. Karzai and another candidate agent for Dr. Abdullah. In the polling station for women, there was no candidate agent observing for any of the presidential candidates, but there was one domestic observer for the Free and Fair Elections Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA). The female polling station was very busy while we were there— one large group of 18 women came in together to vote enthusiastically. By 11:30am, the polling station had seen 105 female voters. The station’s female officials said that their station had opened at 7:00am, smoothly and with no problems.

After observing for around 30 minutes, the amount of time the security team gave us to observe, our team said goodbye to the polling center manager. The manager asked us if we would want to join them for lunch in an hour. It was a friendly invitation but we had to keep moving.

But on the way to the second polling center, the Afghan National Police in their grey uniforms stopped us. This was the third checkpoint in just the two hours we had been out; there were more police and more stops than usual for Election Day. Positively, this showed an attention to security that could have been reassuring to Kabul residents to vote. However, this particular checkpoint was more than an inspection – the police pulled us over and made our security team get out of the cars. They would then not let us move on until the security team had handed over their AK-47s. All this time spent on us meant that much time ignoring other actual obstructions to voting. And with our guns gone, we had to cut short our plans to observe further polling centers.

Later in the afternoon, I went to watch a poll center closing and count with Professor William Maley, Director of the Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy at Australian National University. I observed the female stations again while Bill went to observe the male stations. The atmosphere of the female voting stations at the poll center was busy, professional, and upbeat. The women proudly showed me their inked fingers. I said “Ziad Khoob!” – “very good” – to one of the women, and she nodded in agreement.

The first polling station chairperson told Sadullah and me that the station had closed right at 4:00pm and that there were no problems with voting registration forms. No voters had voted proxy, either. Every voter voted by herself. Sixty-eight women voted at the first station; forty-eight women voted at the second. I checked the ballot seal numbers for both stations with the numbers recorded in the respective journals, and they matched. For the two polling stations, there were two observers for Mr. Karzai present, two observers for Dr. Abdullah present, and another observer from FEFA. (We saw no agents for Bazardost or Ghani or any other presidential candidate all day.) There were also a few other women present – one was bringing tea, another whose purpose neither Sadullah nor I could identify.

Watching the counting made it clear to me that both polling station chairpersons knew the elections procedure well: sorting in packs of 50, all the ballots folded and stamped, counting aloud for all the people in the station. Unfortunately, only an hour into the observing, we were pulled out of watching the poll count. A US military convoy was coming down the road, and our security team told us this would attract too much attention for us to do our jobs.
In sum, I was impressed with the female voting stations I observed. In the first voting station, I saw many women excited to cast their vote. The second voting station had smart, professional women who knew the elections procedure very well. In both stations, there was a good turnout of candidate agents and domestic observers. The only challenges I noted were the dysfunctional hole punches and the problematic police whose aims to take guns/make money and enforce security may have been at odds with each other.

The next morning, the morning of August 21, I went with another observer to take down some tallies of the voting results for two polling centers. These results were posted on the doors of the voting centers, which were still engaged in counting the results of the provincial votes. Anosh, our translator for the day, worked with me in taking down the vote counts. One polling center manager repeatedly asserted that there were 1500 voters who voted the day before, but the total summary of the individual station votes came to less than 800.

We then observed some of the provincial vote counting. It was a laborious process. The ballot itself was like a magazine – nine pages of candidates with their pictures so that illiterate voters could identify the candidates. The polling officials had to sort the ballots page by page, making nine stacks for each of the pages, and then entered tallies for the appropriate candidates. The polling station manager told us that on the previous day, voting finished at 5:00pm and counting the presidential votes took until 8:00pm.

For both days, what I observed seemed to indicate professional processes in place with voters proudly showing their inked fingers for having voted. Most immediately I think of our Afghan translators and how much they wanted us to take their pictures on voting day. They wanted to remember this election, too.

But I also know I saw only four polling centers – four out of the 7,000 polling centers across the country. And this was the capital Kabul – one of the busiest, most cosmopolitan cities in the country. Reports of fraud and terror in other regions of Afghanistan, particularly the South and the East, form another reality. What I saw today and yesterday was positive, but there are many realities in Afghanistan.

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The IEC provincial offices have now received more than 95% of the polling materials and have begun to announce the partial presidential election results. There is still a long wait ahead; results will not be confirmed until September 17th.

But during the wait, people have begun speculating about best- and worst- case scenarios for the results. There is a wide consensus that no candidate has enough popular support to pull a credible first-round victory. Perhaps then the worst case scenario would be an outright win that sparks violent protests and a further undermining of a credible state in Afghanistan. But should the elections go to a second round, there is a sense that Karzai offers the best hope for stability. As one Afghan told me, “I voted for Karzai, although I dislike him. I just hate the others.”

Two summary points of my observations the last few weeks:
First, current procedures and institutions are far from being able to guarantee “fair, free, transparent” elections…. Not “fair” – there is too much evidence of an uneven playing field between the incumbent Karzai and his challengers. The very institution organizing these elections, the IEC, is itself appointed by Karzai. Moreover, in our interviews, all presidential candidate and their representatives except for Karzai’s representative, charged that the ECC does not treat complaints fairly and is unresponsive. (As a rebuttal, Karzai’s campaign said that the “not serious” candidates “make noises.”) There are other charges—that Karzai has used his presidential plane to block other candidates from using air power to distribute flyers, that Karzai paid for buses to take his supporters to voting centers, that Karzai has encouraged other presidential candidates to drop out of the race and support his candidacy by offers of political office, that Karzai has given reconstruction projects in exchange for votes. These are harder to prove but appear to be accepted Afghan electorate. Even if not completely factual, this perception of an unlevel playing field hurts the legitimacy of the elections as “fair.”

Not “free” – because votes appear to be able to be bought, because women continued to face considerable challenges to vote, because violence and insecurity threaten participation… BBC reported that one of its Afghan staff members had been offered 1,000 voting cards for sale at six pounds each. In many areas, particularly the south, social custom calls men to vote for their wives, or vote by proxy. And in all areas, there are few female elections observers and staff. For example, there are few female translators, so that female election observers must go unaccompanied into female voting stations that do not allow male translators. With no language skills, observers find it harder to obtain the complete picture at a voting station. And insecurity continues to intimidate voters: Just around Election Day, there was an attack on ISAF headquarters, a suicide bombing on Jalalabad Road in Kabul, candidate Abdul Rahim’s assassination, roadside bombs that killed elections workers in Badakhshan, the threat (fulfilled later!) by the Taliban to cut off the fingers of those who voted. All of these incidents deter people from voting. Elections are not free if they cost you a finger.

Not “transparent” – because so many candidates and their teams say that their complaints are being ignored by the ECC. And perhaps there are too many complaints for the still fledgling ECC to follow up with logistically. The long delay in reporting the election results will only heighten charges of fraud.

Second, the past few weeks have also highlighted some main issues that are being discussed by Afghans and their candidates for office:

*Government provision of basic services:* Almost all candidates promised an improvement in the delivery of government services. As Mr. Mazhabi’s representative asked: if Afghans cannot meet basic needs such as health care, electricity and water, “how can we have a democracy?” Many candidates pointed to the deterioration of roads in the country under Karzai’s administration. Others proposed specific ideas such as an ambulance/health care truck in every village. And the Afghan translators who worked with DI told me they were bored after finishing their high school equivalent, because there were no jobs and few higher education institutions.

*Reconciliation with the Taliban:* I sensed that this was more a Western concern than an Afghan one—a topic that was seldom initiated by Afghans, more often asked by
international observers/media in interviews. And the Afghan responses seemed to cater to perhaps the Western idea of separation between church and state. Dr. Abdullah’s campaign described that they will not negotiate with the religious, hard-line elements of the Taliban; Dr. Mangal’s campaign described that Afghanistan must observe its constitutional bedrock in Islam—but also emphasized that his campaign is secular.

Women’s rights: Almost all press conferences with the IEC and presidential campaigns discussed the importance of women’s rights, but again, I felt that this concern was more a Western one than an Afghan one. Afghan voices acknowledged the importance of women’s rights, but spoke in platitudes and offered few specifics. Dr. Mangal’s campaign was the exception; his campaign included a woman representative who offered detailed plans about how he would provide more education for women so they can be more self-sufficient: give more power to the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, offer literacy workshops and classes to women, create special women’s courts, etc.

Parliamentary vs. a presidential system: Dr. Abdullah made this a cornerstone of his campaign, so many candidates responded to this proposal. Some agreed with a decentralization of the government, citing ineffectiveness and corruption of the central government under Karzai. Others claimed that Afghanistan does not have strong parties, so decentralization would only bring “too many cooks to the kitchen” and chaos to the parliament.

Underlying all these issues I see a struggle between the need for international assistance and the hope for Afghan ownership. Afghan capacity still needs international assistance: the August 20th elections were internationally funded and there is little independent government revenue. But there are serious problems with international assistance. Besides its un-sustainability (international funds waver with international attention), international assistance comes attached with international assumptions about electoral procedure and cultural norms that may not be aligned with Afghan customs. For example, is it truly fraud if proxy voting is the culturally accepted practice? Perhaps there can be better electoral procedure that can be designed to include such a practice but also require extra steps to verify authenticity? And any visible international assistance, like Kai Eide’s proudly testing the voting ink on TV, could be additional ammunition that Taliban elements use to proclaim that elections are a Western contraption, not an Afghan aspiration.

But there is progress towards more Afghan ownership. This presidential election was the first election in thirty years to be managed and run by Afghans. Afghan National Security Forces provided security. While the election processes may not yet be “free, fair and transparent,” Afghans are learning not at the sidelines, but at the helm. This is progress towards a state that can stand independent from international assistance. I hope that in the next few weeks, while waiting for the final elections results, there will not be hasty violence to stop this progress.