

Afghanistan's Presidential Elections

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August 2009

The views expressed in this commentary are those of the author.

Afghanistan's second presidential election will take place August 20 surrounded by concerns over security, malfeasance and, most importantly, who will win. Polls show that incumbent president Hamid Karzai is likely to be the frontrunner, but the question is where he will get more than 50 percent of the votes required to avoid a runoff with former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah, whose campaign has accused the Karzai government of widespread abuse of governmental assets in the campaign.

For example, A BBC reporter recently exhibited voting cards he claimed were available for six dollars each, and said reports of such malfeasance were widespread nationwide. A U.N. official also noted that the election corruption was so prevalent on all sides that it might in fact cancel out in the end. Coupled with this are Taliban threats to cut off the fingers of those who sport election ink on their hands, and earlier reports of apparently widespread tampering with the registration process. In one southeastern province, where women are hardly visible, some 60 percent of voters registered were allegedly women. The government has announced a one-day ceasefire for election day, except for defensive purposes, but Taliban threats large and small indicate that there will be attempts at intimidation and violence.

Afghans will probably turn out to vote anyway. The U.N. Special Representative in Afghanistan Kai Eide has pointed out that the country can hardly be expected to hold elections according to the norms of western democracies, so a flawed election that takes place with differing degrees of validity in different parts of the country is to be expected. The question to be concerned with is, how will it be accepted and what will happen afterwards?

President Karzai has shown himself to be less than what was expected when the international community picked him to lead Afghanistan in 2002 and dubbed him "Mr. Afghanistan." The title has ironically proven to be more apt than was intended, as his administration has become accused of the traditional Afghan failings of corruption, incapacity and favoritism.

To aggrandize support this time around, Karzai teamed up with questionable figures from the past, such as former defense minister and Tajik warlord primus inter pares Marshall Fahim, and alleged human rights abuser Uzbek leader Dostum, who arrived in Kabul just before election day to the raised eyebrows of the U.S. government. Karzai's team may not look good to the West, but reflects a very Afghan ability to gather quondam enemies for quotidian advantage.

Afghan voters, susceptible to pressures of many different kinds, may well vote for the unlovable coalition because they are afraid, because they seek advantage, and because, above all, they think it will win. The United States government has said it favors no candidate, but the Afghan people think they know what that means, and it means Karzai.

The election could easily produce a second round of voting if no candidate succeeds in getting a majority. Ironically, Taliban threats to disrupt voting, insofar as they are successful, will only help Dr. Abdullah, whose appeal is more to the non-Pashtun areas of the country where the Taliban are less likely to make mayhem. The last-minute appearance of General Dostum from exile in Turkey should effectively give Karzai most of the more than 10 percent of the votes Dostum won in the last election, which might put Karzai over the top. If not, there are several scenarios that might take place.

The stolen election in neighboring Iran may provide a model for Afghan voters if they perceive election results as too egregiously manipulated. Kabul remains the home of powerful ethnic groups, which could take to the streets if pushed too far. Karzai's government is both inept and unpopular, and growing dislike of the foreign presence in the country and in the capital will work against Karzai if political action begins.

The Afghan police and army are neither equipped nor trained for civil disturbances, even if their loyalty were unquestionable. Any such demonstrations, however, would likely be reined in by leaders before they got out of control. After all, one thing that the overwhelming mass of Afghans, and particularly those in Kabul, do not want is to have the Taliban back, and a power struggle in Kabul would only help Taliban propaganda efforts.

There is reason to think that candidates will seek to work together after the election. The third candidate, the highly accomplished former finance minister and World Bank technocrat Ashraf Ghani, has already called for a calm and peaceful election. If Karzai fails to win a majority, the way will be open for a national coalition to rally around the second winner, presumably, Dr. Abdullah, to create a strong alternate to Karzai. This presents problems of organization, adaptability and intent, which will challenge all.

For the second round of voting to become a concerted contest to oust Karzai over the issues of corruption and incapacity, the other candidates would have to quickly regroup, bury their differences and produce a united slate. It will be difficult, but not impossible, to bring off. There are many mitigating factors in the equation, including Karzai's announced intention to offer senior positions in the new government to the other leading candidates. He has also said he would hold a loya jirga for national reconciliation after the election, another populist gesture calculated to garner many votes.

A second round of voting would also strain the resources of the Afghan government and the international community. Elections are expensive and cumbersome and it would be difficult to organize, finance and supervise within the short time frame that is allowed. Whatever complaints are made about the first round of voting would surely be increased by a second round done under more happenstance conditions.

Afghanistan's elections, then, are likely to be an unsatisfying step towards the creation of a state that is far less than its friends had hoped would emerge in 2002. The Taliban and al Qaeda will charge that a flawed election has produced an invalid government. The Afghan people will see it as an exercise that underlines the slow rate of improvement in their lives.

Even a flawed election however, can be seen as a step forward for Afghanistan. The new government will then have to work on the issues that emerged during the first-ever presidential television debate: establishing visible self-government, dealing with the foreign presence in the country and ending the war. It would be an added bonus if it could induce a national consensus and do much-needed housecleaning in the process.