

Afghanistan: Democracy Before Peace?

By Mark Sedra | September 2004

Afghanistan's first election in decades is less than a month away, and, contrary to dire predictions by many analysts and observers, the UN-led voter registration program has proven to be a remarkable success. As of August 21, 2004, one week following the official close of the registration period, 10.35 million Afghans had registered to vote, 41% of them women. The registration drive was perhaps too successful—the number of voters registered exceeded the estimated number of eligible voters by more than 800,000. To some, this discrepancy would be cause for concern, but not to President Karzai. “People are enthusiastic, and they want to have cards,” Karzai recently explained. “If they want to vote twice, they’re welcome,” he quipped (*Washington Post*, August 12, 2004). Karzai and UN electoral officials are correct to point out that such inconsistencies are inevitable in a first election, especially in a setting as complex as Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the issue is emblematic of an expanding array of challenges to the electoral process that has prompted many prominent Afghans and international observers to reaffirm doubts about the timing of the country's first experiment with democracy.

The launch of the Afghan campaign season and the dramatic chain of events that it set in motion have revealed the profound dangers that lie ahead. In a stunning and provocative move, President Karzai commenced his campaign for the presidency without his expected running mate, the powerful defense minister, Mohammed Qaism Fahim. It was anticipated that Karzai would add Fahim to his presidential ticket to cement his ties with the Northern Alliance and to secure the support of the large Tajik minority, to which Fahim belongs. Fahim's replacement is Ahmed Zia Massoud, brother of slain resistance hero Ahmed Shah Massoud and Afghanistan's ambassador to Russia.

Fears that the announcement might precipitate a violent backlash proved unfounded, but the political fallout was far-reaching. Reacting to

the Karzai decision, Yunis Qanooni, the popular former Mujahedeen commander currently serving as education minister, declared his candidacy for president. Rapidly the bulk of the Northern Alliance commanders, primarily Tajiks, defected to Qanooni's camp, including Foreign Minister Abdallah Abdallah and Ahmed Wali Massoud, another brother of Ahmed Shah Massoud, currently serving as Afghanistan's ambassador to Great Britain. With Abdul Rashid Dostum, a powerful Uzbek commander, and Mohammad Mohaqiq, an ethnic Hazara leader, having also entered the race, the eventuality that analysts feared most, an election polarized sharply along ethnic lines, has materialized.

In a sense Karzai's break with Fahim illustrates the maturity of Afghanistan's political process. Breaking ranks with the most powerful military



figure in the country was unthinkable two years ago, as it would certainly have precipitated a violent backlash. In contrast, shortly after Karzai's announcement, Fahim reassured the world that he would not "allow anybody to resort to the gun" (RFE/RL, August 12, 2004). Merely one month after declaring that warlords pose the most salient risk to Afghanistan's fledgling political process, it would have been difficult for Karzai to embrace Fahim, viewed in many quarters as the country's most powerful warlord. Karzai's move distancing himself from the defense minister was the right decision; what is unclear is whether Afghanistan is ready for it. All of the politicking in Kabul has distracted attention from the reality that Afghanistan's security situation continues to worsen. Nearly 1,000 people have been killed in violence over the past year. With circumstances so volatile, even the smallest hiccup in the electoral process could ignite a firestorm.

Many Afghan and foreign experts have argued that the time is not ripe for balloting in Afghanistan. Perhaps the most prominent advocate of this view is Foreign Minister Abdallah Abdallah, who stated in early August that "a preferable situation might have been if we had a five-year term for the government, so we could create institutions and [do] the basic work" (*Washington Post*, August 1, 2004). The general perception in Afghanistan is that the Bush administration's ardent determination to maintain the current timetable is motivated more by U.S. domestic politics—notably the tightly contested November presidential election—than any consideration of Afghanistan's best interests. With the situation in Iraq worsening with each passing day, the prospect of claiming success in Afghanistan has become all too appealing to Bush administration officials. "We are sacrificing our elections for the November elections in

America—otherwise there is no reason to have our election in such a hurry," Afghan presidential candidate Ahmad Shah Hamada lamented (*Washington Post*, August 1, 2004).

The approach currently taken by the international community in Afghanistan amounts to an effort to consolidate democracy before winning the peace. This approach is not without precedent, having been employed with disastrous ramifications in countries ranging from Cambodia to Liberia. Angola provides a particularly instructive example of the dangers of premature balloting. In 1992 the UN achieved what was widely perceived as a "logistical miracle" solution to the country's long civil war by organizing an election contested by the two rival movements, both of which maintained armed wings. However, only days after the polls, a military offensive was launched by the losing party, igniting another decade of civil war (Ottaway & Carothers 2003, p. 2). The parallels with the current situation in Afghanistan, where the principal contenders in the presidential race (with the exception of Karzai) remain armed, are undeniable. In unstable and fragmented societies, such as Angola and Afghanistan, elections typically act as a lightning rod for violence.

Election Fraud

In a recent Asia Foundation survey of 804 people from across Afghanistan, 60% of the respondents indicated that vote-buying would be a problem in the upcoming election (see poll results at <http://www.asiafoundation.org>). With the drug trade booming, warlords and regional commanders have plentiful supplies of cash with which to secure the support of their local constituencies. In a country as impoverished as Afghanistan, such inducements can have a major impact on election results. The poll also found that 50% of the populace believed that cheating in the counting of votes would be a

problem. It is obvious that in spite of widespread public enthusiasm, doubts linger about the government's capacity to hold a free and fair election. Although the registration of the country's eligible voters was a logistical feat that should be commended, it was a phased process carried out over several months. The voting will present similar logistical challenges condensed into one day. To provide a sense of the scale of the operation, there will be 5,000 polling stations across the country manned by an estimated 100,000 Afghans, a plethora of targets for would-be spoilers. Compounding this problem is the fact that there will be no large organized monitoring mission to oversee the balloting and to confirm the legitimacy of the results. Due to security concerns both the European Union and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have opted to send scaled-down electoral monitoring missions to Afghanistan. This leaves a tremendous void in the process, rendering it increasingly vulnerable to malfeasance.

Afghanistan's first election will not be perfect, even if it were delayed for a year. However, at present, the threat of vote-rigging, the lack of oversight capacity, and flaws in the registration system could render its results illegitimate. Many commentators close to the process in Afghanistan have argued that what is most important is merely to hold an election, regardless of any faults it may have. "It is a first step," Grant Kippen, country director for the National Democratic Institute, told the *Washington Post* (*Washington Post*, August 1, 2004). Not only is such an argument intrinsically wrong, it is dangerous. A first election should aim to demonstrate the value and power of democracy to transform a society. Any balloting that fails to meet international standards and merely entrenches existing power structures rather than

facilitating a new generation of civilian leaders will undermine Afghan faith in the system.

Security

The security situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated steadily over the past six months, a trend that is expected to continue as the election draws near. Perhaps the most vivid illustration of the tenuous stability in the country was the recent withdrawal of the Nobel-prize-winning nongovernmental organization (NGO) Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) from Afghanistan in late July, two months after five of its employees—three Europeans and two Afghans—were killed in a brazen attack attributed to the Taliban. The announcement sent shock waves through the aid community, as MSF had been a mainstay in Afghanistan for over 14 years, having endured both the brutal civil war and oppressive Taliban rule. A sense of pessimism has since descended upon the UN and NGO community, prompting many to consider scaling back their operations or withdrawing altogether. Such sentiments culminated in a late August request by the UN staff union for the United Nations to withdraw all international employees from the country. In light of growing frustration and heightened sensitivity to risk, any major security incident involving foreign workers in the coming months could result in a major disruption in international assistance. One need only glance at security statistics from the first half of 2004 in Afghanistan to grasp the severity of the situation:

- 23 U.S. soldiers were killed from hostile fire in half of 2004 compared to 12 in all of 2003.
- 179 Afghans were killed by anti-government insurgents in the first six months of 2004 compared to 119 in all of 2003.

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- 17 international aid workers were killed in the first half of 2004 compared to 14 in all of 2003.

Taliban resurgence is largely responsible for the upsurge of violence in 2004. The Taliban have focused much of their attention on disrupting the October balloting. Since May 2004, 12 electoral staff members have been killed and 33 have been injured in Taliban attacks. Militants have attempted to dissuade Afghan citizens from participating in the upcoming election, killing at least 18 people merely for possessing voter registration cards. In a disturbing incident on July 5, Taliban militants systematically collected and burned all the voting cards carried by women in a village in the southeastern province of Paktia (Integrated Regional Information Networks, August 18, 2004). President Karzai has insisted that the threat posed by the Taliban is “exaggerated” (*New York Times*, July 12, 2004). Though Karzai is correct that the Taliban lack the capacity to unilaterally overthrow the central government, their insurgency continues to gain momentum.

The Pentagon claims that the increase in the Taliban’s attacks on U.S. forces in 2004 is a sign of desperation in the face of a more aggressive U.S. counterinsurgency strategy. Reports from the South seem to conflict with this rosy assessment, however. According to the governor of Helmand province, the Taliban have begun recruiting young people in the area for the first time since 2001. The province’s intelligence chief is quoted in the *New York Times* as saying that the Taliban were 50% stronger in the province than they were one year ago (*New York Times*, August 1, 2004). In the aforementioned Asia Foundation poll, 27% of the respondents in the South expressed a favorable view of the Taliban. Although this is not a majority, it does indicate that the group

has retained a significant support base in its former heartland.

In spite of the rising incidence of Taliban activity, President Karzai has identified warlordism and the persistence of private militias as the greatest threat facing Afghanistan. In July 2004 he signed a decree stipulating that any warlord who did not comply with the ongoing disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) process, known as the Afghan New Beginnings Program (ANBP), would be “considered disloyal and rebellious” (*EurasiaNet*, July 29, 2004). Karzai emphatically claimed that the time for persuasion and accommodation is over and “the stick has to be used” (*New York Times*, July 12, 2004). The problem is that no one knows where this stick will come from. Afghan security forces, still at a nascent stage in their development, are not capable of enforcing compliance, and the U.S.-led coalition has displayed an unwillingness to engage in so-called “green-on-green” disputes (that is, clashes between rival warlords or between warlords and the central government). The UN-supported ANBP has proceeded at a deliberate pace since the end of the pilot phase. Approximately 13,000 of Afghanistan’s 60,000 soldiers have been demobilized as of August 2004. At this rate the program will be hard-pressed to meet its targets of demobilizing 40% of the country’s militiamen by the presidential election and an additional 20% by the parliamentary balloting in May 2005.

It is difficult to envision a free and fair vote in a country where the principal candidates, with the exception of President Karzai, are backed by independent, heavily armed militias. “Elections without DDR are not feasible,” according to Vice President Hedayat Amin Arsala (*EurasiaNet*, July 29, 2004). The widespread intimidation prevalent during the emergency and constitutional Loya Jirga

processes will undoubtedly be even more pronounced during the presidential campaign. Some mechanisms have been introduced to mitigate the threats posed by warlords, notably an election law banning private militia commanders and those guilty of human rights violations from running for the presidency. However, neither safeguard has been implemented, as evidenced by the Afghan-UN Joint Electoral Management Body's acceptance of two of the country's most notorious military commanders, Abdul Rashid Dostum and Mohammad Mohaqiq, as presidential candidates. The joint commission received 115 legal and personal complaints regarding certain candidates and yet took no action against the most influential of the group, leading many to accuse the organization of timidity and impotence.

Post-Election Scenarios

It has become clear in recent weeks that President Karzai's victory in the first round of voting is far from a forgone conclusion. Karzai is clearly the front-runner—a recent poll by the International Republican Institute (IRI) found that 78% of Afghans would vote for Karzai (see poll results at <http://www.iri.org>). However, this poll was conducted before President Karzai's July 26 decision to distance himself from Fahim, a move that has transformed the face of the election. According to the Afghan Constitution, a candidate must be chosen on 50% of the ballots to declare victory, otherwise a runoff is required. The logistical difficulties of holding a runoff, especially at the beginning of Ramadan, would likely cause a five-to-six-week delay. It is increasingly probable that such a showdown would pit the Western-backed Karzai against the Mujahedeen-backed Qanooni, and the resulting five-to-six-week hiatus could witness a breakdown of state order.

In spite of the growing rift between Karzai and the Northern Alliance, the possibility of a deal being struck between the groups, assuring Northern Alliance support for Karzai's candidacy, should not be ruled out. "Everyone is talking to everyone," according to Faizullah Zaki, an aide to Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum (*New York Times*, August 10, 2004). Karzai has responded to such rumors by equivocally stating that he would not make any deals with his political rivals. "There cannot be individual agendas in my government," Karzai told the *Financial Times* (*Financial Times*, August 17, 2004). The president's statement was made largely to appease donors, primarily from Europe, who have become increasingly uneasy over his willingness to strike deals with local commanders and warlords. In early July, the EU hinted that it would withhold aid to Afghanistan due to these concerns. Yet, in spite of Karzai's apparent repudiation of the accommodationist policy that has aroused the ire of donors, he did add a revealing loophole to his statement, affirming that he would welcome opponents joining his campaign if they share "the objective of a lawful, well-to-do state" (*Financial Times*, August 17, 2004). In other words, the door is still open to deals, if they are arranged on the right terms.

If a pact is struck between Karzai and his main competitors, it would lessen the chance for post-election violence, but its long-term consequences would be disastrous. In securing the support of his rivals, Karzai would have to make major concessions, including prominent appointments in his new Cabinet. The presence of regional commanders in the Cabinet of the current Afghan Transitional Administration (ATA) has already delayed reform, divided the government, and engendered the resentment of ordinary Afghans. Most Afghans and international observers view the balloting

as a mechanism to end the phenomenon of warlord government created by the Bonn Agreement; deals at this stage would only entrench it. The premature timing of the elections has presented Karzai with a difficult choice: risk widespread violence by not talking to the warlords or imperil the legitimacy of the country's fledgling democracy by taking them in.

International Support

The support that the international community has provided to Afghanistan's electoral process, particularly in the area of security, has been inadequate. At NATO's June summit meeting in Istanbul, the organization pledged to send 3,500 additional troops to Afghanistan—raising the overall strength of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to 10,000—falling well short of requests by both the UN and the Afghan government. It took until late July for NATO to approve the deployment of additional troops, and it failed to fulfill the target that it set at Istanbul. Two battalions, numbering roughly 1,800 soldiers, will be sent to Afghanistan in September for a maximum of two months to provide support for the elections. The two battalions, from Spain and Italy, will be based in Kabul and will operate in a rapid reaction capacity. But NATO's failure to live up to its modest commitments has eroded its credibility both in Afghanistan and internationally.

The United States has taken concerted steps to adjust its strategy in Afghanistan, both in response to increasing local and international criticism of U.S. policy and to provide President Karzai a boost in the forthcoming elections. Perhaps the most important shift came in the strategy and tactics of the U.S.-led coalition. After two years of vehement

complaints from Afghans over the aggressive tactics employed by the coalition in its sweeps to hunt down militants in the Southeast—including house searches, wrongful detentions, and violations of local customs—the coalition has pledged to soften its approach. After meeting with President Karzai in early August to discuss the issue, Lt. General Barno, the commander of coalition forces in Afghanistan, declared that henceforth U.S. troops would receive training in “local customs and courtesies” and would consult local officials and tribal elders before launching community sweeps and searches (*AP*, August 10, 2004).

Lt. Gen. Barno was the architect of the present U.S. counterinsurgency strategy, introduced in late 2003 and designed to improve relations between coalition forces and local communities. The centerpiece of the strategy, involving the expansion of the coalition's presence from 11 to 26 locations around the country, is the deployment of small 40-soldier platoons at the village level in order to forge ties with village leaders and gather more accurate intelligence. Washington has also made efforts to advance the DDR process, after showing passive disinterest in that approach for the past two years, and has indicated a willingness to engage in the murky and nebulous area of counternarcotics. It remains to be seen whether these moves represent a renewed commitment to Afghanistan's peace building process or merely deft electioneering by the Bush administration.

Recent history has clearly shown the dangers of holding premature elections in post-conflict nations, particularly in ones fragmented along ethnic or religious lines. Sharply divided politically and facing an acute security crisis, Afghanistan manifests conditions

not propitious for choosing new leadership. Even if a major outbreak of violence is averted, it is unlikely that a free and fair poll, earning the trust and faith of the populace, can be conducted. Failure sets a dubious precedent, not only for the first parliamentary balloting, to be held in May 2005, but for the future of Afghan democracy generally.

This irresistible momentum toward voting exemplifies a deep flaw in the modern nation-building project. Elections, the engines of democracy, are often portrayed as a panacea for developing, post-conflict, and post-authoritarian states. But balloting may represent an effort to entrench democracy before the dust of conflict has settled, before a new political order can be consolidated. In such settings, elections serve to widen, not bridge, societal divisions and to delay, not advance, the pace of development. In most cases, the hasty convening of elections betrays an exit-strategy mentality on the part of donor states (Cooper & Pugh 2002, p. 11). Voting provides a convenient pretext for donor disengagement from troubled areas. In Afghanistan, growing donor fatigue, domestic political pressures within donor states—notably the United States—and the diversion of world attention to other crisis areas, such as Iraq and Sudan, have generated the impetus for an exit strategy.

This is not to say that elections are not possible or desirable in post-conflict settings, only that time is needed for such countries to achieve a level of security, stability, and institutional capacity for such processes to be feasible. In Afghanistan, an additional three years of transitional rule might have been sufficient to erect this foundation for democracy. However, notwithstanding a major crisis, the country has less than a month to do

so. To minimize the potential for malfeasance, it is vital that the international community augment its support of the balloting process, particularly in the area of security. As presidential candidate Homayoun Shah Assefy recognizes, “in a country like ours, an election can be a double-edged knife that can hurt or kill democracy” (*Washington Post*, August 16, 2004). Without more international peacekeepers and election monitors to guarantee the legitimacy of the outcome, Afghanistan’s democracy could meet its end before it really begins.

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Recommended citation:

Mark Sedra, "Afghanistan: Democracy Before Peace?," (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, September 2004).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/papers/2004afghandem.html>

Production Information:

Writer: Mark Sedra

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Chellee Chase-Saiz, IRC

p. 8

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