

Afghanistan's Presidential Elections: Spreading Democracy or a Sham?

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Less than a month before George W. Bush's second bid for the White House, his protégé and partner in post-Taliban Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, faces an election that both men hope will not only establish the legitimacy of Karzai's presidency but also prove the Bush administration's claim that the war-ravaged nation's transition to democracy has been a success. Over 10.5 million Afghans have reportedly registered to choose from among a slate of 16 candidates on October 9, 2004, less than three years after the removal of the infamous Taliban regime and their al-Qaeda allies from power in Kabul. "It's a phenomenal statistic," said Bush of the number of Afghan registrants during his first debate with Democratic nominee John Kerry, "that if given a chance to be free, they will show up at the polls."

In the vice presidential debate on October 5, Dick Cheney also trumpeted the upcoming election as the "first one in history in Afghanistan." But Afghanistan is not such a blank slate, and historically there has been no one-to-one correspondence between holding elections and genuine democracy in the country. The difficulties that beset the numerous Afghan elections of the 1960s and 1970s are once again clearly evident. The playing field is not level. Old structures and new US policies favor the handpicked Karzai and his small circle of Western-educated Pashtun technocrats.

NOT A BLANK SLATE

Current amnesia notwithstanding, Afghanistan held 13 nationwide elections for the National Assembly (shura or wolusi jirga) before 1973, when Zahir Shah, the last monarch of the Musahiban dynasty, was overthrown. Though most of these elections were of the rubber stamp variety, some observers consider the parliamentary contests of 1948, 1965 and 1969 to have been relatively free and fair. The key word, perhaps, is relatively. Louis Dupree, a close observer of Afghan politics from the 1950s through the 1970s, has reported how during the 1965 elections a provincial governor told a large gathering that "the elections would be completely free and that each man in voting booth would be alone with God to make his own decision." After listening politely to the governor's speech, Dupree continues, some elders turned to the governor and said: "We appreciate all the government is doing to give us a 'New Democracy,' and your speech was grand but now please tell us who we should vote for, as all the governors have in the past."

There is little reason to think that the person-centered and tribally organized electoral politics of the "decade of democracy" in Afghanistan have disappeared. Among the

original 18 approved candidates for president, there were eight Pashtun, six Tajik, two Uzbek and one Hazara, and all but four of them were running as independents even though a number of them head political parties. The ethnic composition of the candidates reflects the existing political cleavages within the society.

In a sense, the presidential contest will be the third national election in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban. The UN-brokered Bonn Agreement of December 2001 called for a number of elections to help establish a "broad-based, gender sensitive, multi-ethnic and fully representative government" which was "not intended to remain in place beyond the specified period of time" of about three years. More than 1,500 delegates to the emergency loya jirga that elected Karzai as transitional president in June 2002 were themselves chosen through UN-organized elections in eight electoral zones. Some 25,000 local representatives, in accordance with the Bonn Agreement, elected the final list of delegates who attended the loya jirga in Kabul. Karzai appointed small numbers of the delegates. The loya jirga was to "elect a head of State for the Transitional Administration [and] approve proposals for the structure and key personnel of the Transitional Administration." The only accomplishment of the first loya jirga, however, was to anoint Karzai as leader. Denied the privilege of discussing the structure of future administration, the delegates were quickly sent home. In December 2003, a second set of elections chose the membership of the constitutional loya jirga, in which some 500 deputies ratified a new constitution drafted by Karzai's advisors. Several deputies demanded the formation of a transitional parliament to help in the governance of the country, but Karzai and his advisors disbanded the gathering without honoring their wishes.

Article 160 of the new constitution, touted by Karzai and his US patrons as the most "enlightened" in the region, urges that parliamentary elections be held at the same time as the presidential elections. But the parliamentary elections were postponed until April 2005, reportedly due to serious security concerns. If these polls are indeed conducted at the appointed time, Afghanistan will have held one national election per year since the fall of Taliban. How meaningful are these alleged democratic exercises? Because the structural problems of the past are unresolved, the spate of elections in post-Taliban Afghanistan may become little more than a means to make permanent what was promised to be an interim government and may even lend international legitimacy to the person-centered system of governance in the country.

LEGACIES OF THE PAST

Meaningful elections rest, first and foremost, on the existence of the detailed and accurate demographic information that is lacking in Afghanistan. During the twentieth century, the monarchy, and later the Communist regime, simply declared that the dominant Pashtun groups were the majority in the country and therefore entitled to rule over others. Historically, in fact, the terms Pashtun and Afghan have been synonymous. Twentieth-century governments avoided taking a complete national census, fearing that it would prove them wrong in their demographic estimates. The same claim of Pashtun majority status persists in the public pronouncements of the post-Taliban government in Kabul, a source of considerable tension with the non-Pashtun "minorities." Much to the

displeasure of Karzai and his close associates, the exclusionary nature of the term Afghanistan was raised in the deliberations of the constitutional loya jirga and, to some extent, has been an issue in the presidential campaign. There are no immediate plans for conducting a nationwide, scientific enumeration of the population, and so the highly exaggerated claims of demographic share by ethnic groups great and small continue with no end in sight.

The dearth of reliable statistical information is further complicated by other administrative legacies of the past. First, there remains the issue of the arbitrarily drawn administrative provinces (wilayat) and districts (wuluswaly/hukumati) that have served as the basis for allocation of seats in Afghanistan's loya jirgas and legislative bodies (wulusi jirga and meshrano jirga). These same administrative units continue to be the basis for allocation of social services and economic development projects. Not surprisingly, the number and distribution of such administrative divisions on the ethnic-tribal map of the country has acquired enormous political importance. There are a larger number of provinces (and districts within them) in the predominantly Pashtun-inhabited eastern and southern regions as well as the southwestern regions along the Pakistan border. By administrative fiat, past governments ensured their claims of Pashtun "majority" representation in all elected bodies. The transitional government has used the same divisions to compose the recent loya jirgas. These practices have tended to reflect the power alignments in the capital. After the 1992 takeover of Kabul by the Tajik-dominated mujahideen government, for instance, the number of districts was increased in some northern provinces, especially in Badakhshan (the home province of then-President Burhanuddin Rabbani) to "correct" the past disparities. In 2004, two new provinces, the mostly Tajik Panjshir and the majority-Hazara Dai Kundi, were created by presidential decree in a gesture to "multi-ethnic" government. Still, the perceived administrative injustices against the non-Pashtun regions persist, and will continue to mar the fairness of future national elections.

A second problem is that there are no established legal methods of determining residency or citizenship in Afghanistan. Before the 1978 Communist coup, a kind of national identity document called a tazkira was issued, to males only, in some parts of the country. The primary purpose of the tazkira was to identify young men reaching the draft age of 21 and ensure that they completed two years of compulsory military service. Young Pashtun males living in the tribal belt along the Afghan-Pakistani borders were declared exempt from this service, however, and were never issued the tazkira. Nor did the Afghan governments ever issue birth certificates for boys or girls. The recurring refugee displacement into neighboring Iran and Pakistan during the last quarter-century of wars has rendered the problem of proof of Afghan identity ever more complicated. During the 1980s and 1990s, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees reported the registration of some 3.2 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan and about two million in Iran. There were many Afghan refugees in Pakistan, especially from the central and northern parts of the country, who were not registered for political reasons, while there were allegations that many Pakistani citizens were registered as Afghan refugees in order to receive monthly rations from the UN. Voter registration, to say the least, is fraught with problems.

"PHENOMENAL STATISTIC"

Karzai and Bush have proclaimed that the reported registration of more than 10.5 million Afghans to cast ballots in the presidential elections is evidence of their success in bringing democracy to Afghanistan. This number, according to an Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) report in September 2004, may "well exceed 11.5 million -- roughly half the estimated population of Afghanistan" once the registration of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran is completed. As noted by the AREU, an international NGO funded by the European Union, that number far surpasses the 9.8 million eligible voters estimated by the Joint Election Monitoring Body -- a UN and Afghan government body appointed by Karzai to oversee elections. Upon closer inspection, Bush's "phenomenal statistic" may be evidence of a flawed electoral process, and even a fraud in the making.

There are two common explanations for the over-registration. First, consistent reports from different parts of the country claim that individuals have obtained multiple voter registration cards on the assumption that they could sell their cards for cash payments at the time of elections. In the summer of 2004, I met at least one person who had obtained two registration cards in Badakhshan and others told me that they knew people with several cards both in Kabul and other provinces. Second, there have been press reports that some Pakistani Pashtun have been encouraged to register for the presidential elections in Afghanistan. In the absence of any meaningful way to verify voter identity, there is considerable opportunity for abuse. These allegations are given credibility by the AREU finding that in the southeastern provinces of Paktika, Paktia and Khost, along the Pakistan border where Taliban attacks are frequent, over 140 percent of estimated eligible voters are registered to vote. Six other predominantly Pashtun provinces (Laghman, Nangarhar, Kunar, Ghazni, Helmand and Kandahar) are also reportedly over-registered, compared to only four predominantly non-Pashtun provinces (Nuristan, Balkh, Badghis and Herat). In the absence of other explanations, and in the face of mounting security concerns about the safety and security of election workers, polling stations and ballot boxes, the outcome of the presidential elections in Afghanistan will sit under a cloud of suspicion.

CAMPAIGNING, AFGHANISTAN STYLE

Abdul Latif Pedram, one of the 16 remaining candidates, has complained that the election is designed merely to benefit the incumbents Bush and Karzai. According to the New York Times, many other candidates have threatened to boycott the elections because of the de facto endorsement of Karzai by the US and European governments. If this should happen, as the New York Times reporters wrote, the election will be "seen as American-directed political theater designed to impress American voters instead of Afghan ones." No one has yet called for a boycott, but two candidates have dropped out and thrown their weight behind Karzai, whose administration primarily designed the rules and regulations governing the elections.

Critics charge that Karzai has delayed work on reconstruction projects so that he could use the occasions of their opening for campaign appearances. Since Karzai was not able

to make more than two trips outside of Kabul before the official end to the election campaign, mainly because of threats to his own life, he invited large delegations of tribal chiefs and local notables to come to the presidential palace in Kabul to be entertained at government expense. Karzai's use of national radio, television and print media in support of his campaign has come under vociferous criticism from other candidates as well as some election observers. According to BBC radio, the leaders of one tribal community, the Tarazai, in the southeastern province of Khost along Pakistan border, aired a statement on their provincial government radio station threatening to burn the houses of those who did not vote for Karzai.

Karzai was also the only candidate who enjoyed access to US military aircraft for campaign travel as well as round-the-clock protection by a private US security firm. The AREU report also found ambient suspicion that the US had allocated \$30 million for the registration of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, who are primarily Pashtun, to enhance Karzai's chances for reelection. The appearance of favoritism in the ethnically charged climate of Afghan politics makes it seem that the goal of the campaign is to elect a president at any cost, especially in the eyes of the often ignored and abused non-Pashtun "minorities."

Ultimately, the 2004 presidential campaign in Afghanistan is likely to raise public expectations of the newly elected president to an unrealistic degree. The aftermath will likely be defined by gradual disillusionment with the government, and the almost certain division of the national vote along ethnic-sectarian lines will usher in post-election squabbles reflective of the country's long and sad history of inter-ethnic grievances. If the elections are intended to elect a president at any cost, they will likely succeed. If they are intended to articulate and inculcate the common national values, shared goals and aspirations of a nation, and to offer alternative visions and strategies for achieving them through collective effort, they will fall far short of their goal.

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