

Afghanistan's Elections A Political Development to Avoid Civil War?

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On Saturday, April 5th, Afghanistan voted for the provincial councils and for their new president who will succeed to Hamid Karzai. In the first democratic transfer of power that the country has known, electors showed in unprecedented numbers to choose among eight candidates – out of the eleven officially registered, three withdrew in the weeks before the elections. The preliminary results will not be known before April 24th, but the front-runners are: Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, former minister of foreign affairs (October 2001–April 2006) and opponent to Karzai in the 2009; Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, the former finance minister (June 2002–December 2004); and Zalmay Rassoul, former minister of foreign affairs (January 2010–October 2013); he resigned to run in the elections). The terms of the Constitution prevented Hamid Karzai from running for a third term.

The campaign leading to these elections was at the domestic forefront for the past months. Afghanistan, destroyed by 35 years of war and left with shattered hopes, has proved remarkably capable of resilience in this occasion. Thus the electoral campaign has revealed a very active civil society, with a dynamic youth, a primordial component of Afghan society and a main target of the campaign – 68% of the population is under 25 years old. Women's groups as well have played an important role, raising awareness among women about the importance of taking part in the electoral process.

The 2009 presidential elections were highly controversial due to massive electoral fraud. Adding to widespread corruption, poor governance and poverty, they led to deep discontentment among the population and fostered support for the insurgency. This year's elections, contrary to 2009, were being held at arms-length by the Obama administration and international stakeholders, consequently viewed as Afghanistan's sole responsibility. As such, they represent an institutional and a security test – the effectiveness and the capabilities of Afghan governmental and

security actors to take charge of the process. More than 350,000 soldiers, police and intelligence officers have been deployed (numbers from the Ministry of Defense); according to the Independent Electoral Commission, the institution in charge of administering and supervising Afghan elections, 250,000 international and domestic observers were monitoring the process.

It is doubtful that a successful process, despite the hopes and wishful thinking of many domestic and international observers, will bring about a fundamental change. On the contrary, as Sarah Chayes from CEIP has observed, what we will see is “more of the same”. The candidates to the presidential elections are not a new generation, and as such they are already familiar to the political scene. The real impact of the elections will be felt in two main matters. Firstly, the status of the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) – negotiated with John Kerry, but which Karzai has refused to sign in November 2013 – needs to be settled in order to anticipate the number of remaining troops in the country post-2014 and the following security situation. The consequences of not signing the agreement could prove to be dire: US president Obama has stated the possibility of a “zero-option”, which would leave no troop in the country after December 2014. The security and political situations could thus quickly deteriorate; the economic prospects would follow, as international financial commitments would decrease. As all the candidates back the BSA, it should be signed by August 2014. Secondly, there needs to be, following the elections, an inclusive consensus-building process, which would start a dynamic of inclusiveness of Taliban fighters into mainstream politics. As Scott Smith (USIP) rightly points out “*in Afghanistan, electoral politics are an expression of civil war by other means*”¹. These negotiations will take time, and as such they cannot be modeled on electoral calendars. But starting the process is crucial, as the continued denial of insurgents will only increase their determination to be heard by other means.

¹ Scott Smith, « The Meaning of Afghanistan's Elections: Part 1. Toward a Cliff of Uncertainty ». *United States Institute of Peace*, March 31, 2014.

In this regard, the determination of the Taliban to disrupt the process has become increasingly evident as the elections got closer. Surprisingly, the electoral process had been so far largely removed from the country's ongoing violence. Moreover, the Taliban's warning, issued on March 10th and threatening the population with violent consequences if they voted, has not prevented Afghans from showing up in numbers to polls. Thus, if numbers are correct, the participation to this year's election is more than twice that of 2009. While the wave of violence that started mid-March has proved the Taliban's capacity to undermine the whole process by making any would-be voter their direct target; it also showed their incapacity to prevent the elections. The Pashtun-dominated areas were the first affected and many Pashtun voters had expressed their intention to stay home on Saturday. The risk of this ethnic group's disenfranchisement could thus become the primary obstacle to these elections' legitimacy. As Barnett Rubin pointed out, "*the Taliban are not trying to defeat the Afghan army in battle, but instead are aiming straight for the political conditions that enable the security forces to function*"². Consequently, a failed electoral process has the potentiality to trigger more violence and undermine the fragile cohesion of Afghan society.

² Barnett Rubin, « The Election Is the Enemy », *Foreign Policy, South Asia Channel*, April 2nd, 2014, available at : http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/04/02/afghanistan_elections_taliban_ghani_attacks.

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