

# ISA S Brief

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## **Afghanistan Elections 2009: The Day of Reckoning**

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### **Abstract**

In my second brief of the series on the evolving situation in Afghanistan resulting from the presidential election held on 20 August 2009, I will look at some of the preliminary indications of what appears to have happened while the formal announcement of the outcome is awaited. The hope that the people will give a clear indication of their preferences was not realised. The country seems headed towards a breakdown of the social order essential to govern a multi-ethnic state. It appears that the hope that the election would contribute to political progress in South Asia is proving to be untrue.

### **Preliminary Indications**

Afghanistan held its second presidential election under the new constitution on 20 August 2009. The first, held five years earlier, confirmed Hamid Karzai as President. He had earlier been placed in that position by the coalition of western powers who, under the leadership of the United States, had defeated the Taliban regime in December 2001, following a brief but bloody war. The second election was meant to confirm that, in spite of the many problems Afghanistan faced, the country was set on the right track. It was also meant to confirm the new approach adopted by the young American administration of President Barack Obama that had promised military effort in the country, aimed at decisively defeating the Taliban, while setting it on a course to long-term development. If the election was to confirm that the new strategy was working, that did not happen. Instead, it did more to underline the many challenges the country faces in spite of the heavy involvement of the international community in trying to find some solutions. Three of these problems were highlighted by the election.

The first, of course, is the strengthening grip of the Taliban in the south of the country – in the provinces bordering on Pakistan. The Taliban continued to assert their control over large swathes of land by carrying out acts of terrorism not only in the south but in and near Kabul as well. There were more than 200 rocket attacks in southern Afghanistan on the election day.

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The Taliban were successful in intimidating people and forcing them to stay indoors in large numbers on the day of the election.

Preliminary estimates gathered from informal sources indicate that there was a very low turnout rate in the southern provinces. In the broad southern region – in provinces such as Kandahar, Helmand, Oruzgan and Zabul – election officials reported a turnout as low as five to ten percent, effectively disenfranchising the region viewed as the most crucial in the American-led military operation. This was the objective of the Taliban and they appear to have realised it. Their campaign of intimidation was meant to deny Karzai any legitimacy among the Pushtun people who constitute the vast majority of the population in the southern provinces. Karzai had governed without much Pushtun support, having relied heavily on such minority ethnic groups as the Tajiks and the Uzbeks in the country's north. These groups now had a candidate of their own in Dr Abdullah Abdullah who had served as Foreign Minister in an earlier Karzai administration.

The low turnout in the south fed into the second problem, the deep ethnic divide in the country that has always been an issue but has worsened since 2001, when American forces dislodged the Taliban, a basically Pushtun force, with the help of the Northern Alliance made up of the Tajiks, Uzbeks and other minority groups. If a reading of Afghanistan's history teaches anything, it is that the country has achieved stability only when it was led by a Pushtun leader who had the support of the minority ethnic groups. In selecting Karzai, a Pushtun, to lead the country, the western alliance had sought to repeat that formula but the way the President governed did not increase his support among the Pushtuns. His desperate attempt to shore up his support by selecting Marshal Fahim Khan, a Tajik, as a running mate compounded the problem and posed a serious challenge for the United States. I will deal with this issue in greater detail below. Karzai also brought on board Dustam Khan, the despised Uzbek warlord, who had been accused of the massacre of the Pushtuns during the 2001 war. That did not endear the President to his own people.

The third is the absence of good governance in the country. Karzai's increased reliance on the warlords, many of them with blood on their hands and some of them deeply involved in the drug trade, did not help the President create a following among those in the country who wanted a relatively clean and effective government in place. This sentiment was particularly strong among the Afghan diaspora whose members had come back to lend a helping hand, providing the struggling country with both the capital and human skills it needed. This group also had a candidate in the field. Ashraf Ghani, their representative who had once served at the World Bank and was the country's Finance Minister, seemed not to have done well in the polls.

### **What may Happen in the Immediate Future**

Ballot counting proceeded much more slowly than was indicated at the start of the election period. Then there was an expectation that the results would be announced on 25 August 2009, five days after the polls were held. That did not happen. There were reports of widespread fraud in the balloting, including allegations that Karzai's supporters had stuffed ballot boxes in the south where the turnout rate was exceedingly low. The Election Commission said on 28 August 2009 that it had received more than 2,000 complaints of fraud. Dr Abdullah, who had posted thousands of agents to watch the polls, showed a video of people stuffing the ballot boxes. On the same day, preliminary results with just 17 percent of the votes counted gave Karzai 44 percent of the total and Dr Abdullah 35 percent. If no

candidate won an outright majority of the votes cast, a run-off election must be held between the two top contenders. If that happens, the Afghans will have to return to the polls in mid-September 2009.

### **The American Reaction**

Is there disappointment in Washington with the election results? A little over 24 hours after the polls closed, President Obama stepped out on the White House South Lawn to pronounce the election as something of a success, saying “This was an important step forward in the Afghan people’s effort to take control of their future, even as violent extremists are trying to stand in their way. I want to congratulate the Afghanistan people on carrying out this historic election.” This was about the fact that the election was held, but what about its outcome? “Our only interest was the result, fairly, accurately reflecting the will of the Afghan people”, said President Obama, as he prepared to leave for his August vacation.

However, to secure victory, Karzai seemed to be playing a dangerous game. There were conflicting reports about the manner and content of the meeting between Karzai and an American team that visited his office soon after the election was held. The United States team was led by Richard C. Holbrooke, President Obama’s special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, and included General Karl W. Eikenberry, the United States Ambassador to Afghanistan, and his deputy, Francis J. Ricciardone Jr. The Americans said that it was a routine exchange. However, the Afghans let it be known through selective releases of the exchange that the discussion was “explosive”, with the Americans demanding that a run-off election was necessary in order to bestow legitimacy to the electoral process.

According to one interpretation, “Mr Karzai, in a feat of political shrewdness that has surprised some in the Obama administration, has managed to turn the growing disenchantment with the United States to an advantage, portraying himself at home as the only political candidate willing to stand up to the dictates of the United States.”<sup>2</sup>

### **How Karzai is likely to Govern if he takes Office?**

If Karzai is able to get himself installed as Afghanistan’s President without going through a run-off election, he would create a large number of problems for his country, for the United States, for Pakistan and for South Asia. The absence of legitimacy will further alienate the Pushtun population in the south that is already restive and where the Taliban seem to be gaining strength in spite of the increase in number of American troops in the area. By bringing in Marshal Fahim as his running mate, Karzai would have given a position of considerable authority to a person the United States has said was corrupt and made use of the trade in drugs to accumulate enormous wealth. When he served as Defence Minister in an earlier Karzai administration, he was known to use military planes to transport drugs to Russia to feed the drug route to Europe and bring back suitcases full of cash. By law, the United States is obliged to take action towards a person against whom there is evidence of drug trafficking.

Restiveness among the people in Pakistan’s north would compound the country’s problem with extremism and deal a blow to its ongoing efforts to cleanse its own territory of this

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<sup>2</sup> Helene Cooper, “Karzai using rift with US to gain favor”, *The New York Times*, 28 August 2009, pp. A1 and A9.

highly disruptive force. And, finally, the failure of the electoral process to produce a legitimate government would have gone against the trend in South Asia where three elections – in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India – in 2007-08 had demonstrated that this region was turning a corner, a conclusion I had advanced in an earlier paper for the Institute of South Asian Studies.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Shahid Javed Burki, Visiting Senior Research Fellow, ISAS, “Three Elections and Two State Actions – Has South Asia Finally Turned the Corner?”, ISAS Insights No. 70, 28 May 2009. Available at <http://www.isas.nus.org/events/insights/71.pdf>.