



BULLETIN

No. 50 (50) • August 26, 2009 • © PISM

Editors: Sławomir Dębski (Editor-in-Chief), Łukasz Adamski, Mateusz Gniazdowski,
Beata Górka-Winter, Leszek Jesień, Agnieszka Kondek (Executive Editor),
Łukasz Kulesa, Ernest Wyciszekiewicz

Afghan Elections and the Activity of Rebel Groups

by Piotr Krawczyk

Presidential elections and elections to provincial councils were held in Afghanistan on 20 August 2009. Their course—much calmer than had been expected—and the relatively high electoral turnout showed that rebel groups did not have sufficient strength and were not able to coordinate their actions to seriously disrupt the electoral process. Some of them may have deliberately refrained from disrupting the vote. The question of electoral irregularities, the result of either negligence or deliberate actions on the part of the authorities, could prove to be the greatest obstacle to Afghan society's recognition of election results.

The Activities of Rebel Groups prior to the Elections. Groups fighting against the central government see the present order in Afghanistan as illegal. For a long time, the rebels (including the Taliban) have been declaring that they would take steps to make the holding of elections impossible. This was supposed to demonstrate their influence and contribute to destabilizing the situation in the country. Many members of the international community who are engaged in Afghanistan doubted whether holding the elections would be possible. During preparations for the vote and during the voting itself, rebel groups had the opportunity to disrupt the electoral process, but at no stage of the elections were they able—or willing—to take up effective action to carry out their threats.

Complementary registration of voters was carried out between the fall of 2008 and the spring of 2009. During this time, over 4.5 million Afghan voters were registered. Along with the voters registered earlier, this boosted the number of eligible voters to 17 million. The process was surprisingly calm, with the Taliban and other rebel groups refraining from disrupting the registration process on any massive scale, and occasional attacks on facilities issuing ballots or sporadic theft of ballot cards had little impact on the smoothness of electoral procedures.

At the same time, in some regions rebel groups were encouraging local residents to collect their registration documents and were themselves accumulating ballot cards. This gave rise to doubts about the real intentions of the rebels, especially those with the weakest ties to Al-Qaeda and other international organizations of Islamic radicals. Both the registration and subsequent course of the electoral process indicate that some of the rebels may have been interested in taking part in the elections, especially to the provincial councils in the country's southern and eastern regions.

The representation on provincial councils of some armed opposition groups could consolidate the political position of those groups, constituting the first step on their way to joining the main current of Afghan politics. Rebel groups may have gathered as many as 2 million ballot cards. Votes controlled by some armed opposition groups were may also have been used in the presidential elections. Immediately prior to the elections, President Karzai's administration came to an agreement with some rebel groups in southern and eastern Afghanistan, which may have contributed both to calming down the voting process and to a higher number of votes for the incumbent president.

The electoral campaign was another stage of the electoral process during which rebel groups could have carried out their threats to disrupt the vote. Contrary to the expectations, the rebels did not attempt to assassinate any of the presidential candidates, and of the 3,196 candidates to provincial councils only one lost his life (in Ghazni province). Neither were any major disruptions noted at the rallies of support for candidates during the electoral campaign.

During the period immediately preceding the voting, the rebels intensified their armed activeness, targeting first of all international coalition forces and central Afghan government institutions. In the

two weeks preceding the voting, the Taliban fired on the vicinity of the U.S. Embassy and the Presidential Palace in Kabul. For the first time since February 2009, there was also a suicide bombing in the capital directed at ISAF headquarters. At the same time, rebel forces did not launch any significant actions that could disrupt the process of supplying the necessary voting materials to over 6,500 polling stations. The wide-scale operation of supplying a large number of boxes, ballot cards and other electoral materials was a good opportunity for the rebels to demonstrate their potential, but once again the capabilities of armed opposition groups turned out to be limited.

Safety during Elections. Polling day was calmer than the Afghan authorities and the international community had expected. About 20 persons, civilians and representatives of Afghan and international security forces, lost their lives in about 150 different incidents, but no wide-scale wave of attacks on polling stations took place. While pre-election commentaries pointed out that rebel groups might carry out a series of suicide bombings on electoral commissions following the example of the 2005 elections in Iraq, no such incidents were noted. Voting took place in about 6,200 polling stations, which means that only 300 stations (about 4%) remained closed.

The level of safety and, consequently, the possibility of voting, differed from region to region. While in the north instances of polling station closure were sporadic, more closures were observed in the south and east. The greatest disturbances occurred in the provinces of Kandahar, Helmand and Ghazni. In the latter, problems with setting up polling stations were reported in 10 out of 18 districts, and about 10% of all polling stations remained closed.

Rebel groups did not succeed in bringing down voter turnout to a level that would warrant questioning the new authorities' legitimacy. With the turnout around 50%, it was some 20% lower than during the 2004 elections, but still higher than expected. It should be stressed that concerns over safety were only one of the factors discouraging the Afghans from voting. Just as significant were voters' disenchantment with the government's inefficiency over the past few years and fear of electoral fraud. Rebel groups did, however, succeed in bringing about differences in voter turnout between regions. Whereas in the north the turnout reached as high as 70%, in certain provinces in the south and east it did not exceed 20%.

Consequences. The electoral process has shown that rebel groups do not have the resources allowing them to seriously affect the situation in the country, although they remain dangerous. The scale of their activities and their lack of coordination showed that armed opposition groups are not in a position to take up long-term effective actions. Their individual factions have different aims, making the undertaking of common actions difficult.

Preparations for the elections and the elections themselves indicate that certain rebel groups (mainly of a local character) could gradually join in the mainstream of Afghan politics. With the strengthening of Afghan security forces and the international military contingents, they could become less inclined to continue their armed struggle against the central authorities. In contrast, members of international fundamentalist groups active in Afghanistan are pursuing other targets. For them, the elections in Afghanistan were yet another opportunity to launch attacks—covered by the media—against U.S. and other NATO forces, although they had little interest in disrupting the elections themselves.

The elections have also demonstrated that Afghan forces, with the help of the international coalition, are in a position to maintain a satisfactory level of safety in the country. Significantly re-enforced Afghan police, army and secret services were an important obstacle preventing rebel groups from carrying out effective actions during preparations for the elections and during the ballot itself.

In light of the above, the key issue at present is the legitimacy of the new Afghan government. Electoral irregularities could significantly undermine the credibility of Afghan authorities and the international forces supporting them. If a conviction were to spread among Afghan society that the new authorities have risen to power as a result of electoral fraud, public trust in the state administration will shrink even further, and this might not only strengthen the existing rebel movements, but also lead to the emergence of new centers of opposition, e.g. in the north of the country.