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Parliamentary Elections in Afghanistan: A Small Step towards Greater Afghan Leadership

by Patryk Kugiel and Gareth Chappell

The outcome of the Afghan parliamentary elections of 18 September is mixed. Clearly, there were shortcomings in terms of security and legitimacy, yet they also point to a number of positive developments on last year's presidential vote. As a result, the elections should be seen as a small step towards greater Afghan leadership, but the decision to complete the process of transition to Afghan security lead by 2014 and, in turn, the withdrawal of NATO forces, has largely been made. The outcome of the elections appears not to have derailed this timetable.

The September Afghan parliamentary elections were the second held since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001. More than 2,500 candidates, mainly independent (political parties are not well established in Afghanistan), including over 400 females, vied for 249 seats in the lower house of Parliament—the Wolesi Jirga. Some 11.4 million Afghans were eligible to vote. The turnout exceeded 40% according to the first official estimates and was unevenly spread across the country, with the lowest attendance recorded in the most insecure areas in the south and east. Preliminary results are not expected to be announced until the start of October and the final results towards the end of the month.

For the first time, the elections were a wholly Afghan-led process. The Independent Election Commission (IEC) was responsible for preparing and overseeing the vote, the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) for considering and deciding on any complaints, and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) for providing security at the polling stations. Hence the elections provided a good test of the Afghan state's capacity to manage its affairs independently. Consequently, the outcome will have a bearing on NATO's policy towards Afghanistan, especially its exit strategy.

Security in Afghanistan. The election campaign was held against the backdrop of intimidation and a deteriorating security environment. The number of security incidents and civilian casualties this year has increased by 69% and 31% respectively compared to the same period in 2009. The key ISAF offensives in spring brought only limited success, while the insurgents managed to expand their presence further north. In the run-up to the elections, four parliamentary candidates and dozens of election workers were assassinated. The IEC decided to close more than 1,000 out of the 6,835 polling centres and a further 500 were closed on election day because of concerns over security and fraud. The Taliban repeatedly called for a boycott of the elections and threatened to target anyone who participated in the process.

Despite these threats, they failed to disrupt the vote. According to data provided by NATO, election day witnessed 22 fatalities and 485 security incidents, including 294 insurgent attacks nationwide, compared with more than 50 deaths and 479 attacks during last year's presidential vote. Consequently, a turnout of 40%, if confirmed, should be seen as a relative success when compared to 2005 (50%) and 2009 (about 35%) or the elections in Iraq (50%) earlier this year. Even though the initial security estimates were rather optimistic, the frequency and scale of insurgent attacks were not as bad as many had anticipated.

This supports the emerging argument that the situation in Afghanistan is better than many perceive. Figures show that 2010 has been the deadliest year for ISAF since the war began (with 538 fatalities to date). However, when one takes into consideration the increase in the number of ISAF

troops as well as the growing frequency and intensity of operations, this appears not to be the case. Further, since peaking in June (102), the number of ISAF casualties has dropped off (51 as of September 28). Reports published by NATO suggest that ISAF has become increasingly successful in capturing Taliban commanders, eliminating fighters and confiscating large amounts of improvised explosive devices (IED). Further, attacks from U.S. unmanned aircraft in Pakistan's tribal areas have weakened the operational capacity of the insurgency's leadership. Another positive development is that the ANSF have reached their last interim target strength two months ahead of schedule (Afghan National Army—134,000 and police—109,000). Yet it is agreed that the ANSF still need greater quality. In addition to their relative misfortune at the parliamentary elections, the Taliban failed to disrupt all other major events held in Afghanistan this year, i.e. the Consultative Peace Jirga in June and the Kabul Conference in July, which suggests they have been substantially weakened or possibly lost the initiative.

Legitimacy of Democracy. The elections were marred by massive irregularities, which took many forms, such as ballot stuffing, proxy voting, underage voting, fake voter identification cards or repeat voting. The ECC received 3,613 electoral complaints in total. After investigating just under three-quarters, two-thirds are considered serious enough to influence the final results. The complaints will now be evaluated at a provincial level, with the ECC acting as an appellate instance. Although the ECC may order a recount or even some votes to be re-cast, it is unlikely that the results will be seen as invalid. For a number of reasons, a recount is unlikely to lead to a severe crisis, as observed in 2009.

Prior to the elections, the international community consciously lowered the expectations regarding the quality of the vote. The West is now willing to accept that Afghanistan—a war-torn country—will not meet all the standards of a liberal democracy for the foreseeable future, if ever. NATO countries are reluctant to jeopardize further their relations with President Karzai, as they have no other reliable alternative to call upon. Hence it has been made clear that the West is not accountable for the quality of Afghan democracy, which in the long term will depend on improvements in good governance, a decrease in corruption and eradication of poverty rather than on the electoral process alone.

Although the results are not yet known, it appears that current members of Parliament and candidates supported by the incumbent president have the best chance of success. If confirmed, this would facilitate peace negotiations with the Taliban. Although 56 candidates were disqualified by the ECC on account of links to illegal armed groups, it is difficult to rule out the possibility that Taliban affiliates or warlords might acquire seats in the Assembly. This could partly explain the lower level of attacks in some areas of the country. In short, the elections have shown that the political system and electoral law need major reforms in order to make the country a functioning democracy (e.g. strengthening the political parties, issuing a credible list of registered voters, etc).

NATO Exit Strategy. Support for the war in NATO member states is at an all-time low, so political pressure to withdraw from Afghanistan is intense. The intention of many NATO governments to pull troops out of the country is complemented by the will of the Afghans to assume greater responsibility for security, development and governance.

In December 2009, President Obama announced an “Afghan surge” to improve the security situation in the country and begin the transfer of U.S. troops out of Afghanistan in July 2011. At the London Conference in January 2010, the international community agreed to develop a plan for a phased transition to Afghan security lead to begin by late 2010/early 2011, providing the conditions are met. The subsequent framework was approved by NATO member states in April and then endorsed at the Kabul Conference in July (both in 2010) along with the goal of Afghan security lead across the country by 2014.

The parliamentary elections have not derailed this timetable. Nothing short of a complete failure both in terms of security and legitimacy would have done that. The decision to complete the process of transition by 2014 and, with it, the withdrawal of NATO forces, has largely been taken. The lowering of expectations prior to the vote and the immediate reaction of many NATO member states in praising the performance of the ANSF following the elections confirm this. If anything, the performance of the ANSF, which was also praised by many independent and impartial organisations, has served to reinforce this timetable. As a result, NATO will reaffirm its partnership with Afghanistan at the Lisbon summit in November 2010 and most likely announce by the end of the year that the process of transition to Afghan security lead is underway.