



SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report focuses on local perceptions of the 2014 presidential elections in Afghanistan. It situates the elections within growing concerns about the political uncertainty of the upcoming transition and explores what Afghans might consider to be a “free and fair” poll in this context. The report details the findings from over fifty interviews conducted with respondents from three different regions of the country, both male and female, and representing all of the major ethnic groups. This research, funded by the United States Institute of Peace, builds, in particular, on earlier in-depth studies of the 2009 and 2010 elections conducted for the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit.

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Justifying the Means Afghan Perceptions of Electoral Processes

Summary

- Afghan voters spoke of earlier rounds of voting in 2004, 2005, 2009, and 2010 as having had a cumulatively negative effect in terms of encouraging officials to be more corrupt, destabilizing local political balances, and resulting in less equitable access to power and resources.
- Despite these developments, many respondents also described the ideals associated with elections in a positive way and felt that they were a potentially useful means through which to transfer power but had failed to live up to this potential due to manipulation by Afghan leaders and a lack of coherent support by international donors.
- The understanding of many respondents of what constitutes a “free and fair” election, however, differed in several ways from what might be considered a Western approach to elections.
- While people did express concern about whether elections were likely to be free and fair and often detailed how elections had not been transparent in the past, most were much more concerned with the uncertainty of the upcoming political transition than they were with the process of the elections themselves. Elections were part of a much broader debate on relations with the Taliban, the drawdown of foreign forces, the breakdown of the tenuous connections between ethnic leaders built by Karzai, and the political and economic effects of the decrease in international aid.
- Related to this, respondents were generally more anxious about the outcomes of the elections than about the specificities of electoral processes, such as whether the elections would be held according to strict procedural standards.
- A prevailing concern was that as elections approached, there would be less incentive for national and regional level powerholders to remain allied with the government and stay within the current system. Elections were considered likely to promote political chaos and, potentially, civil war as international troops leave and current coalitions break apart.
- Respondents implied that the Karzai administration represents both the best and worst aspects of a presidential system—maintaining the ability (albeit personalized) to hold

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loose coalitions of ethnic and other leaders together but, at the same time, exerting overbearing control with little oversight.

- Fundamentally, most respondents saw elections as a hazardous hurdle that could encourage renewed competition between groups.
- These findings suggest that if elections are going to facilitate as opposed to hinder transition, the Afghan government and international community must work to ensure that they are inclusive, symbolic of change from the past, and integral to negotiation processes.
- Elections will only be perceived as free and fair if there is a significant incentive for a wide range of political actors to continue participating in the political process. There is a need for both Afghan leaders and international diplomats to work to ensure the participation of as many groups and political leaders as possible.
- The extent to which the election is perceived as a fair competition between political rivals does not contribute to the legitimacy of the government established as much as it represents a symbol of a political order that contrasts with both the tyranny of the Taliban period and the chaos of the 1990s civil war. Despite other concerns about elections, they are still a symbol considered important to many Afghans.
- Technical reforms will do less to convince individuals that the elections will be free and fair than will continued negotiations between the Karzai government, moderate members of the Taliban, various allies of the current government, and the international community. Elections must form part of these negotiations by providing a means for different groups to express their collective interests. Long-term reforms to the system are needed, but these should be a part of an international assistance program that reaches well beyond the drawdown of troops.

Introduction

Within the overall political and military transition, presidential elections scheduled for spring 2014 will play a critical role in the setup of a postintervention Afghanistan. Politically, the election will allow the public choice of a new national leader, the first since Hamid Karzai was installed at the 2001 Bonn Conference as head of the Afghan Interim Authority in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Taliban regime. Beyond this basic function of selecting a leader, there is still hope among some international actors that the poll will also contribute to the process of building and legitimizing the Afghan state. Most recent discussions among internationals have focused on how to combat the fraud endemic in the 2009–10 polls and bolster the propensity of elections to install a legitimate government.¹ But the scale of fraud and insecurity in the last round, the stakes of the 2014 elections for both Afghans and their international supporters, and the divergent views between and among Afghans and internationals over the source of fraud in 2009 and 2010 raise the question of whether it will be possible to conduct polls in 2014 that are internationally approved and perceived as “free and fair” by Afghans.

A major dilemma for internationals who support elections in Afghanistan is that it is imperative for Afghan voters to perceive the elections as free and fair, regardless of how they are judged externally. Yet, as several studies have pointed out, Afghans do not always use value-laden Western political terms to define legitimacy.² In developed democracies, rooted in rigid notions of the rule of law, outcomes tend to be judged on respect for procedure and fairness. Afghans, on the other hand, tend to assess the overall legitimacy of the process based on their judgment of the outcome. Little research to date has explored the question of what an Afghan concept of “free and fair” might actually mean. This question formed the initial intent of this study. As research progressed, however, it became clear that

the primary concern of most respondents was the broader issue of how elections and their outcomes would affect Afghanistan's increasingly uncertain political future. While these two issues cannot be entirely separated, Afghans seem more focused on the need for stability than on the technicalities of electoral legitimacy and less likely than Western analysts to draw a connection between the two.

This report draws on research conducted over three months in the summer of 2012 in seven districts across the provinces of Kabul, Parwan, and Balkh.³ Researchers for this project conducted approximately fifty interviews with government officials, local leaders, and voters from all major ethnic groups. These were the same districts that the authors studied during a much larger work on the impact of the 2009 and 2010 elections, which included over five hundred interviews from these three provinces.⁴ In some cases, the same respondents were approached for this study, in order to conduct follow-up interviews.

This report draws primarily on qualitative data: the viewpoints of those at the district and village levels. These perspectives contrasted at times with the ways in which elections tend to be discussed by the political elite in Kabul. For example, when discussed at the national level, issues of ethnicity and politics often seemed paramount, while at a local level, Afghans were less likely to discuss politics in ethnic terms (the focus was more on regional power dynamics and local economic factors). This being the case, this report does not draw attention to the ethnicity of the speakers unless their ethnicity directly affected their comments about elections. While time and security constraints limit the scope and breadth of the study's conclusions, the authors believe that the familiarity of the research team with the areas studied, and their ability to compare new data gathered with that of earlier research, lends credibility to the findings.⁵

Analyzing local views on past elections and in particular on the fraud that became such a defining feature of the 2009 and 2010 polls, the report assesses perceptions and potential support for elections in 2014. It reveals a general fear of political uncertainty and a focus by respondents on electoral outcomes as opposed to processes. It concludes that elections could be an important part of Afghanistan's political transition provided that they are inclusive, symbolic of change from pre-2001 regimes, and seen by Afghans and internationals to be an integral part of broader processes of political change.

The Impact of Previous Elections

Elections in Afghanistan are too often viewed by international observers as isolated events. Afghans, however, tend to see the polls that have taken place in recent years as an interconnected series of political negotiations and assess their combined effect on local political dynamics. Many Afghans have voted in two presidential, two parliamentary, and two provincial council elections in the past eight years. These experiences color the ways in which the upcoming elections are discussed—and almost always in a negative light.⁶ Complaints focus on security issues, fraud, and, more generally, the ways in which elections have failed to create a transparent, accountable, or effective government. As one unemployed man in Kabul described, "Our MPs have not paid attention to what they promised during previous elections. In their campaigns they promised to pave streets and that we would be given other things [from the government] in the future. When the elections ended, however, they disappeared. . . . When people need the help of MPs, there is no way to access them. We have people who really need help. For example, on this street there is a family in which both the husband and wife are disabled [and they have received no assistance from the government]." Few respondents considered this likely to change in the near future.

These complaints were common across conversations in all areas where research was conducted. One shopkeeper pointed out that in his neighborhood in Kabul city, security

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was quite good on election day in 2010, and yet he still watched some people vote up to four times each for the parliamentary candidate of their choice. Such anecdotes, reported widely in the international and Afghan media, made stories of both election-related violence and fraud more extreme and commonplace than they often actually were, exacerbating the perceptions of these problems. As the same respondent continued, “You can imagine the situation in insecure provinces where the opportunity for fraud was very, very high. . . . [As a result] people have lost their trust in the election process, and they believe that their votes do not have much effect and that their votes will not get the result they expect.” Like this shopkeeper, other respondents often considered conditions in neighboring districts to be even worse than those in their own.

Criticism of elections also appears to increasingly reflect general frustrations with the Afghan government. While Afghans in rural communities have relatively low expectations of government service provision, in urban areas, where expectations are higher, many respondents conflated electoral problems with wider government failings. There is little sense that elections could help to increase the accountability of individual representatives or to strengthen connections between people and government.

Beyond criticisms of elections’ ineffectiveness, some respondents expressed the view that previous rounds of post-2001 elections had done more harm than good. Many described elections as simply a new mechanism for ruling elites to solidify and extend their power, sometimes using violence in the months leading up to the polls to demonstrate the extent of their control in a given area.⁷ As one analyst recently commented, the focus of these elites has been one of gathering votes more than winning over voters.⁸ Prior to the presidential election in 2009, the research team spoke to one shopkeeper from Istalif who had been cautiously optimistic about the election. When following up with him this year, he described some of the turmoil that had engulfed the community since the campaigns for Parliament in 2010. He described an armed confrontation between supporters of two candidates and suggested that certain political brokers at a higher level, not visible to the local community, had encouraged multiple candidates to run in the area to ensure that the community’s vote and ensuing political allegiances would be divided.

These divides were mentioned with particular frequency by respondents in the Shomali area. Like some other regions in the north, this region is ethnically diverse, which has contributed to the fact that no one group has dominated it. Instead, a series of mid- and low-level commanders spread across the area have tacitly sided with the Karzai government over the past decade. Elections have served to provide these commanders with the opportunity to exert their influence in ways that have heightened existing tensions and disregarded more traditional norms of honor and allegiance. Some of these commanders have used elections simply to increase their own fame, while others have worked to trade votes from followers for political favors from officials in the future.

The shopkeeper from Istalif cited above, whose family had long held close connections to a particular local commander, described that the commander had run for election in 2010 by making great promises but had “cheated” supporters out of money, even while ultimately losing the election. The key sense here was that the commander had used his followers to gain political favor from candidates but had ultimately not delivered anything to the community, despite benefitting himself. “These are all the reasons I and everyone else are very disappointed with the elections, and I personally do not plan to use my vote in the next elections if the situation remains the same,” he concluded.

In more extreme cases, respondents felt that elections were not simply fraudulent but directly responsible for violence, resource-grabbing, and political division. A sense of pessimism was near universal, even if it varied by degrees. As one man from Balkh reflected,

These days the situation has become too complicated for ordinary people, and they have gotten tired of thinking about politics. . . . Every day the gap between the people and the government widens, and they are losing the hope they had before the first round of elections. There is nothing motivating them to think about political issues. This is all because of the poor performance of the Afghan government and the international community.

This legacy of the past ten years gives voters little confidence that selecting leaders through elections will see them securely through the coming political transition.

Two Types of Electoral Fraud

The fraud that occurred in the 2009 and 2010 elections in particular has shaped the way that people perceive the authority of their current representatives. As one man explained, “This situation has given people the feeling that the MPs in Parliament are not their real representatives, and that they have gotten into Parliament through fraudulent elections, which were merely empty symbols.” Such accounts suggest the fraud of 2009 and 2010 undermined the Karzai administration, the legislature, and the election process more generally,⁹ leading to a resignation that, since the next elections will be flawed, the process will not be less important than its outcomes. While respondents blamed a variety of Afghan political figures—including the president, the head of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), and others for fraud—they also expressed a clear frustration with the international community for not having done enough to prevent fraud and also for engineering the results. One young shopkeeper in Istalif made a direct connection between the extent of international funds available in Afghanistan and the levels of electoral fraud: “There are no fair and free elections. They sell the votes. All the votes are weighed with money. America has brought the money and people have become corrupt.” This kind of analysis—associating the high levels of international funds in the country with increased corruption, in elections specifically and in the administration in general—was common among respondents.

Ultimately, however, most of the blame fell on the central government and Karzai himself for having set a bad example from the top. One district governor (a Karzai-appointed official) suggested, “Bullying, fraud, and bribery should be solved from the center to the base. A lamp is a good example of this; if it is bright in the center, it can illuminate objects around it very well.” There was little expectation that Karzai would work to ensure greater transparency in the upcoming elections.

Instead of using fraud as a blanket term covering all aspects of electoral malpractice, respondents indicated a distinction between two types of fraudulent activity: local-level, observable fraud, and national-level manipulation of the results. On a local level, many described watching voters voting multiple times or candidate agents putting pressure on IEC officials to change figures. Respondents in Qara Bagh explained how local supporters of certain candidates set up stations where ink could be washed off the fingers of voters systematically, using bleach and other chemicals provided in bulk by the candidates. In other instances, local leaders and supporters of candidates stood inside, or just outside of, polling stations, pressuring voters to vote for a specific candidate, sometimes offering financial incentives.

Interestingly, most respondents seemed to imply that examples of local-level fraud were of minor concern or solvable. Some suggested a more effective voting card system. Others thought a more active police presence (or simply a less biased one) or more international monitors could reduce cheating at the polls.

National-level fraud was discussed in starkly different terms. Respondents referred to perceptions of tallies being fixed at counting stations by the IEC—for example, by

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changing the numbers on the tally sheet after the votes had been counted and recorded. They also made less specific accusations that national leaders had made deals with each other and fixed election outcomes, particularly in the presidential elections. These perceptions included reference to certain ethnic leaders who allegedly promised Karzai support in exchange for ministerial positions. Complaints about this type of fraud, however, almost never involved concrete stories. Instead, they were generally allegations and rumors, underlining a general skepticism that those outside the central political elite could ever influence the outcome of an election and a lack of confidence that real votes matter. In contrast with discussions of local fraud, there was the sense that little could be done about these high-level machinations and that in 2014 there would be few means of actually making negotiations transparent.

Despite these negative perceptions about past elections, respondents' views of the idea of elections were not entirely pessimistic. Few suggested that the 2014 presidential election should be cancelled, and some remarked that simply holding elections had been a good thing for the country. They mentioned feeling pride for voting and living in a country that elected its leaders in the same way that others did—even while questioning the extent to which elections were legitimately democratic. One female activist in Istalif mentioned that elections demonstrate “the power of the people.” For others, recent elections were seen as superior to previous means of allocating political power in Afghanistan.

Some respondents referred to certain concrete political benefits that elections had brought. This endorsement, however, was not evenly distributed. Urban, literate respondents, particularly among Hazaras, were more likely to discuss positive aspects of elections than their rural counterparts. This was partly because security conditions in previous elections were notably better in Kabul and other urban zones than in rural areas, which saw significantly more election-related violence in the weeks leading up to the vote.¹⁰ And while both urban and rural respondents complained about fraud, reports of irregularities were more extreme in rural areas.

In addition, both Hazara and non-Hazara respondents suggested that Hazara communities had been particularly successful at mobilizing voters. The most extreme example was the Ghazni parliamentary election in 2010, where, according to initial returns, Hazara candidates had won all eleven seats, despite composing about half of the population of the province. While several accounts have described how insecurity in Pashtun areas made it more difficult for Pashtuns to vote,¹¹ it is also apparent that Hazara leaders successfully mobilized their community members and took advantage of the single nontransferable vote (SNTV) system, which inordinately rewards strategic voting among organized constituencies. Less extreme examples of a similar pattern were seen in Kabul, where Hazara candidates won thirteen of the thirty-three available seats. In addition, there was the general perception among many respondents of different ethnicities that Hazara candidates and youth were simply more involved in campaigns than other ethnic groups and that this activism translated into votes.

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Perceptions of “Free and Fair”

As suggested by the distinction made between types of fraud, low-level fraud and ballot box stuffing were not seen as a major hurdle to holding free and fair elections. Instead, respondents suggested that elections could be more free and fair if the ruling elite is more transparent in its political dealings and more active in soliciting public support. For example, a candidate buying the votes of a community by means of a local broker was often seen as only slightly problematic, whereas elected representatives who failed to deliver services to their constituents in exchange for their votes, or who became increasingly inaccessible once

in Kabul, were seen as undermining the rights of individuals and communities to access political and economic opportunities through patronage networks.¹²

As a corollary, communities that felt assured of their access to political and economic opportunities through other means, such as through the presence of an unelected influential patron who could support their interests at local and national levels (for example, a minister or a presidential advisor), were generally more positive about elections and the extent to which they were free and fair. The small Turkmen population in Afghanistan's north, for instance, tended to discuss elections more positively than other communities. They believed that elections had been relatively free and fair and presented an opportunity to participate in political decision making. This is surprising in part because the one Turkmen candidate who had won a seat in Parliament for Balkh province in 2005 lost his seat in 2010, and no other Turkmen candidate was elected in the province. This candidate, however, maintained influential connections in Kabul regardless of whether or not he was an elected parliamentarian—which could account in part for the generally positive view of elections held by Turkmen respondents. Many were eager to learn from their candidate's electoral defeat as they prepared for upcoming elections. As one local leader said, "Elections are like gambling in that many people participate and some of them win and some of them lose. Our leader lost the last election, but it is good that we are participating and other groups can see us participate." In these cases, minority groups clearly seem to be at least benefiting from the political visibility that elections provide.

Respondents were also likely to speak about recent elections as being more free and fair than the political systems of previous Afghan regimes. The following response from a shopkeeper in Kabul was typical: "Elections are good because people are free to vote for whomever they choose. If we compare the current situation with past governments, it has improved because we can now vote. . . . Previously it was the king or the government who decided who should be in which position. This was a dictatorship, and there was no role for the people in past governments." However, many respondents qualified this support by referring to some perceived effects of elections: "Elections are good because people are free to vote, but this has brought no real change in the past twelve years. . . . Some parliamentarians try to raise issues with the government, but the government does not listen to them. Government officials and parliamentarians work to fill their own pockets, not to help the people. When the election is over, we will not see them until the next election."

As this quotation suggests, many respondents did not advocate a primordial rejection of elections and spoke highly of elections in their idealized form, but it was clear that elections had failed to live up to that ideal. Most respondents took a pragmatic approach, and by far the most pressing issues were the looming political uncertainty associated with the confluence of the election, the scaling down of international troops, and the potential for a new government replacing the Karzai regime.

While the element of political competition is often emphasized above and beyond other aspects of the electoral process in the West, for many Afghan respondents it was not so much the competition between candidates but the overall transparency of the system that was critical to defining a fair election. For these respondents, it seemed that elections would be considered more successful—and more fair—if national and local leaders participated in what was perceived to be a transparent manner—specifically, by soliciting the support of their own local communities. This would mean more direct evidence that support for certain officials actually generated resources for a community in a fair manner. Currently, many perceive both government and international funds to be distributed somewhat haphazardly among the political elite, creating an appearance that the relationship between communities and government is secondary to shadowy elite dealings. Greater transparency would lead to a public reaffirmation of the relationship between these communities and

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their leaders, making leaders more likely to provide services and patronage more openly for their followers. In contrast to this ideal, however, a number of respondents expressed the concern that elections would be likely to make politics less transparent, hinder an open relationship between individuals and officials, increase tensions among the political elite, and make the future even more uncertain. Most respondents did not think it was reasonable to expect that the informal bargaining among political elites in Afghanistan would decrease in the near future as a result of elections.

The Fear of Political Uncertainty

Viewpoints on the upcoming elections are generally mixed with broader fears about political uncertainty in the coming years. These concerns are rarely broken down into neat categories but instead reflect the multiple sources of potential instability that prevent a clear picture of the emerging future. In one sense, this reflects the diversity of actors involved in the insurgency. One respondent pointed out that insurgents in his home village now include members of several different groups, including Afghan Taliban, Pakistani Taliban, and a host of other disgruntled youths and mercenaries. Another respondent, a student in Kabul, expressed the fear that the Afghan security forces would not be able to maintain control over competing political actors who might resort to violence once the international troops departed:

International assistance is important so that this country does not return to civil war. . . . If the international community doesn't support the next election or it is not held properly, it is very likely that the pre-2001 conditions will return and all that has been gained in the last decade will be lost. I think Afghan security forces cannot control the situation. . . . Unless they are greatly improved and become capable [of standing on their own] in time for the next elections, candidates and parties will not accept the election. What will happen is that they will again take their guns that they have stored, since the disarmament process was never done properly. If the votes of a party or of particularly influential candidates who are likely to have armed supporters are not counted correctly, it is likely that the situation will turn volatile.

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Additionally, there is a real concern that those who maintain connections to the government today may relinquish these connections in favor of building stronger alliances with the Taliban or other antigovernment groups tomorrow.

In order to facilitate analysis, this section will attempt to clarify these intertwining concerns in the context of the upcoming elections, which are scheduled to take place at the same time as the withdrawal of international troops. These two processes have raised fears that the current government will break up, that other opportunistic groups will rise up, and that both government officials and local strongmen will use the current disorder to increase their own personal power and wealth.

The Drawdown of International Troops

Most interviews for this study began with a discussion of elections, past and forthcoming, but in accordance with the answers provided, soon digressed to the consequences of the withdrawal of international troops on both the elections and the political future of the country. There was concern that, with fewer international troops, security conditions would not be good enough to hold elections, or that after voting the new government would not be strong enough to stand on its own. There was also concern that the loss of international troops would likely encourage meddling by other states: "I think the withdrawal of foreign troops will create more insecurity during the next elections, especially since the interference of neighboring countries and the armed opposition will increase." Although widely disliked

by Afghans for their local actions, the general presence of international forces has nevertheless been considered a deterrent to the more overt interventions of Iran and Pakistan in particular.

Fears about the troop drawdown, however, are not simply about the potential for it to create a security vacuum in certain parts of the country following the election. Statements made first by President Barack Obama, and later by both U.S. diplomats and military officers, about the withdrawal of international troops have also raised serious questions for many Afghans about the commitment of the international community to stabilizing Afghanistan. Contributing to this have been the U.S. electoral debate comments of Vice President Joe Biden on the certainty of troop withdrawal in 2014; a bluntly titled *New York Times* editorial on the subject, “Time to Pack Up”¹³; and recent discussions of a “zero option”—no troops in Afghanistan after 2014—during the Karzai-Obama meeting in Washington in January 2013.¹⁴ These widely publicized statements have contributed to a proliferation of local conspiracy theories about the exact role of the United States and other NATO countries in Afghanistan. Some of the more extreme theories propose that the United States is actually supporting the Taliban in order to destabilize the country, thus justifying a long-term military presence.¹⁵ As one Istalifi explained, “It is surprising that the Americans could defeat the Taliban in less than a month in 2001 when they [the Taliban] were very powerful. But now, with thousands of troops and facilities, they [the international military] cannot resist them. In fact, it seems that the West does not want a solution.”

Other respondents in urban areas, likely with greater access to the news media, also pointed to existing divisions within the U.S. government on the future of the region. In particular, people talked about California Congressman Dana Rohrabacher, who has expressed vocal opposition to the Karzai government and support for so-called opposition figures, as an example of the U.S. government actually encouraging instability. Rohrabacher and his views gained a great deal of attention after he was denied a visa to visit Afghanistan, with some respondents assuming that he represented an official U.S. position.¹⁶ Congressman Louie Gohmert’s suggestion that an independent Balochistan be carved out of Pakistan and Afghanistan has also provided fuel for stories within the Afghan media about shadowy strategies being pursued by international governments.

This lack (or perceived lack) of clarity regarding the international community’s long-term position has done little to reassure Afghan voters that the country’s political future will be stable or that it will be secured through transparent elections. Among most respondents there was a clear sense that elections were unlikely to be free or fair unless supported by international troops but also a growing sense that international troops could not support, or were not interested in supporting, this process.

The Return of the Taliban

Overlapping with discussions about the withdrawal of international troops are fears about the return of Taliban influence. Very few thought it likely that even moderate former Taliban would participate in elections as candidates or voters. Instead, respondents predicted that the Taliban and other insurgent groups would take advantage of the postelection weakness of the new government, combined with the decrease in the number of international troops, to assert their power. Some Hazara respondents were concerned about the possibility of ethnically motivated reprisals toward their group for having gained so much over the past decade, both through the electoral process (as discussed earlier) and in terms of general economic growth and stability. Already some attribute recent killings of Hazaras to the Taliban despite other more likely explanations. As one Hazara in Kabul explained, “We are currently experiencing the killing of Hazara people by nomads who are really members of the Taliban in the Behsood and Nahoor districts [in Ghazni], while our leaders are asleep in

Fears of a Taliban return tended to represent only a part of concerns about instability and violence more generally.

their houses, paying no attention.” While local feuds and land disputes between nomads and Hazara communities are probably a better explanation for much of the recent violence than a renewed systematic campaign on the part of Taliban groups to target Hazaras, the perception that killings have been ethnically motivated demonstrates the extent of the fears and suspicions held by Hazara respondents about a return to previous forms of persecution.

Some respondents reasoned that the declared withdrawal of foreign troops had given the Taliban little incentive to participate in either the upcoming elections or the current proposed peace negotiations, since the Taliban are likely to hold an even stronger bargaining position once international troop levels decline. This calculation helps explain the fairly negative view of peace discussions that was often presented: “Reconciliation with the Taliban has not been successful so far. It has not brought any changes to the security situation, and insecurity will only increase as foreign troops leave the country.”

Most respondents were skeptical of recent advances in peace talks, such as the setup of Taliban offices in Qatar, and few felt it likely that significant numbers of Taliban would take part peacefully in the electoral process. In the time since the research for this report was conducted, negotiations between representatives of the Taliban and the Afghan government outside of Paris have created a more optimistic mood in some political circles. Despite this optimism, it is still not clear how broad the support within the Taliban is for such negotiations and, as many respondents pointed out to the authors, earlier negotiations have yielded little in terms of moving the country toward more transparent democratic structures.¹⁷ Perhaps surprising from an external perspective, however, fears of a Taliban return tended to represent only a part (and in many instances a relatively small part) of concerns about instability and violence more generally. Respondents living in areas where the Taliban have been most active were most vocal about their reemergence. In other areas, concerns were prioritized differently. As one man in the Shomali explained, “People are really worried about what will happen after 2014, but they do not fear that the Taliban will actually be able to return. They are concerned, instead, that there will be clashes among political groups and parties, creating instability and insecurity across the country.” This demonstrates the extent to which the multiple competing interests of political players vying for recognition represent, for many, a greater threat than the prospect of a new regime potentially taking control.

The Breakup of the Current Ruling Alliance

Another related fear expressed by respondents was that leaders currently aligned with the Karzai administration may turn against each other once he is no longer in office, and that elections in 2014 will incentivize the breakup of several existing political alliances. As numerous conversations across all districts studied made clear, the current Afghan government is considered by Afghans to be a fragile coalition of ethnic leaders, held together, albeit weakly, by the negotiation tactics of one central individual—President Karzai. As one Kabulí explained, “Counting the votes of the Pashtuns, plus the votes of the Tajiks brought in by Fahim, plus the Hazara and Uzbek votes due to the agreements between Mohaqqueq, Dostum, and Karzai, we can see that Karzai collected the majority of the people’s vote [in 2009]. In addition to this, Karzai had the international community’s support because foreigners wanted him to complete the projects that he had started.¹⁸ . . . Karzai, with the support of the international community, was able [at that time] to buy or make deals with ethnic leaders to secure the majority of people’s votes.” The concern now, however, is what will happen when this coalition begins to break apart?

Much of Karzai’s power in political negotiations to date has been connected to his ability to make high-level appointments, such as district and provincial governorships and ministerial posts. Given that the constitution prohibits him from standing for reelection, he has

lost his ability to project an image of control over these appointments. The fragmentation or coalition realignments that will result from this loss of perceived power are destabilizing due to the uncertainties they present. Rumors of Vice President Marshal Fahim having endorsed a shift to a parliamentary system—a view shared by some prominent Tajiks and other ethnic minorities—have exacerbated this concern, suggesting a weak commitment among certain elites to the continuation of the current system. With so much reliance on the personalized patronage networks of President Karzai without institutional structures in place, such as multiethnic political parties or even a neutral cross-ministry civil service, the prospect of maintaining the current order appears slim. Allegiances both across and within ethnicities are likely to shift as incentives to stay aligned with the government alter.

Despite these fears, most respondents expressing views on the subject thought that Karzai would choose a close ally or relative to run in his place, and that this candidate would be elected. As one Hazara respondent in Kabul explained, Karzai's favored candidate would probably win as a result of the president's aptitude for elite bargaining and his being "very skillful at breaking up opposition coalitions." This respondent referred specifically to the deals quickly made by Karzai in the approach to the 2009 elections and his attempts to undermine a growing opposition, in part through a near constant reshuffling of cabinet positions and governorships. More recent discussions between Karzai and a series of opposition leaders may indicate that he is again trying to pull together a coalition in support of one of his close allies, though they may also be attempts to undermine the formation of a more coherent opposition.¹⁹ Nevertheless, while few spoke positively of the political leaders loosely supporting the Karzai administration at present, it was clear to many that the vulnerable alliances he has managed to hold together are far preferable to the potential violence that could occur were these coalitions to split. As potential candidates for the presidency have already begun to emerge, voters are concerned that the peaceful, democratic competition ideally found in elections will trigger violent rivalry as the resources of the current government are redistributed and fought over.

The Fear of the Return of Civil War Tensions

Fears about elite fragmentation were combined with the possibility that ethnic differences would increasingly drive armed conflict, as it had during the 1990s civil war period. Among smaller minority groups, concerns focused on Pashtuns attempting to exert their control over the central government, particularly in preparation for a post-Karzai transition. There were several theories about how this might play out. As one schoolteacher described, "These days, it is rumored that [a strong, high-level Karzai supporter] is going to be appointed the new head of the IEC. If he is appointed, he would definitely work for Karzai. In addition, he is very much a Pashtun nationalist, and this would create huge problems for elections in the future because he would work to support certain people put forward by Karzai. In such a case, with a person like [this] heading the IEC and working for Karzai or a specific ethnicity, the result of an election would not be accepted by the people, and this may turn into a major problem for the country."

Others cited the return of local ethnic tensions. Hazara respondents mentioned the unresolved land disputes between Hazara groups and nomadic, primarily Pashtun groups (Kuchis). As one explained,

In the campaign for Karzai, Mohaqeq and Khalili promised us that the problem with the Kuchis would be solved forever if we voted for Karzai. . . . Now we see that the Kuchi issue is not only still unresolved but that we can no longer travel to Bamyan and Ghazni [provinces with large Hazara populations and significant tensions with neighboring Pashtun communities that are often accused of being pro-Taliban by Hazara groups]. You may have heard that ten people were beheaded in Jaldiz on the way to Bamyan from Kabul.

Such responses reflect the fear that a candidate using ethnicity to mobilize voters might also further encourage ethnically motivated violence, as in this case emulating Taliban-style brutality.

A few respondents did see the potential for improvements in relationships between minority ethnic leaders through the elections, particularly if leaders from the Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek minority groups were united behind a candidate. Even these respondents, however, predicted increased cooperation only between certain ethnic leaders, not necessarily between groups themselves, and many more predicted an actual decrease in cooperation. Respondents across a wide spectrum of the social groups represented in our sample considered ethnic tensions to be exaggerated and manipulated by political leaders to solidify their positions. As one man stated, “It is government leaders who are encouraging these tensions and making people fight against each other based upon ethnicity and language.” In this sense, ethnicity was perceived as being simply another tool for opportunistic groups and leaders to manipulate political dynamics on a local level.

Other Opportunistic Groups

A significant question concerns what role other smaller but still influential groups, such as Hezb-e-Islami (HI), will play in the elections. Several in the Shomali noted that a faction of HI, led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, part of the armed opposition to the government, had become more active recently, perhaps with the intent of disrupting the elections and the wider transition process. HI’s more “moderate” branch acts as a political party and has long since generated significant influence in government through the acquisition of key posts. Respondents were generally divided on the potential connections between these branches, and on whether they felt certain powerful individuals within government would be able to encourage Hekmatyar’s faction to participate. The most optimistic of respondents saw this potential participation as a form of closed-door negotiations, however, and not official candidacies for elections. More commonly, respondents felt that the more extreme armed opposition groups had more to gain from remaining outside the process entirely than from resorting to violence in the aftermath of presidential elections.

Other Fears

Fears about instability following the elections were not solely political. Several respondents described the challenges of making economic decisions under uncertain conditions. As one property dealer in Kabul explained, “My business is not doing well at the moment, because people are not sure what will happen after the foreign troops leave the country. Traders are not investing and they are trying to pull their money out of the country to invest it elsewhere, until they can be sure that there will be a stable government in the future.” Others pointed to reports that former vice president Ahmad Zia Massoud was stopped at the Dubai airport in 2009 carrying \$52 million as evidence of economic uncertainty at the highest levels.²⁰ These suspicions reflected claims made by news reports in 2012 of wealthy Afghans leaving the country with \$8 billion.²¹

Particularly among the educated elite in Kabul, there is a concern that government officials who are currently earning a great deal from the international presence in Afghanistan have little incentive to work toward the long-term stability of the country. Those assuming that they may lose their positions after the coming elections may try to squeeze as much as they can from the international presence for their personal gain. One respondent complained, “Government officials are busy trying to increase their assets and receive more funds and contracts for their companies, instead of working honestly to bring security and peace to the country.” For some, the fact that Karzai cannot run in 2014 is perceived negatively, since it means that he and some of his closest allies will be more likely to work on exit strategies than long-term policies to strengthen the government.

Related to this is the sense that another round of fraud-tainted voting will reinforce the perception that the only way to advance politically in Afghanistan is through corrupt manipulations of patronage networks. A new president will have to reconfigure these networks, which will not just create political and economic instability in the short term but also reinforce the notion for all political leaders that the best means of advancing within the system are by using nontransparent personal relationships that tend to marginalize local communities.

None of these concerns were expressed by voters or local leaders in isolation. Instead, all were interlinked as perceptions of elections being embedded in a series of political processes that are happening simultaneously in Afghanistan. In general, no respondent thought that elections as they currently appear to play out (i.e., tainted with fraud, vote buying, and the potential for violence) were likely to contribute in 2014 to a smooth transition into a stable political future. While a few respondents did mention the potential for an Arab Spring in the country, this was not discussed favorably. One man in Kabul predicted, "If the next government is like the current government, it will lead to a social explosion like in Arab countries." Here, as with most other respondents, the Arab Spring was not seen as a potential democratic awakening but as a state of chaos in which the government loses complete control.

A Concern for Outcomes Over Processes

As this discussion suggests, while many were disappointed with the fraudulent elections in 2009 and 2010, most respondents were more concerned with the potential outcome of elections in 2014 than the nature of the actual election process.²² Although many had complaints about the way elections had been conducted in the past, the interlinking of the 2014 elections with broader transition fears meant that these complaints were considered less important than the overall result of the process. Very few respondents, particularly among rural interviewees, were interested in discussing how the voting system could be improved. This suggests that most felt that significant reform of the system under the current conditions was unlikely. This perspective contrasts starkly with the fact that within the international community much effort is currently being made to look at how the voting process takes place and how it can be improved.²³

There was also a pervading sense that power was being allocated, not through elections but through opaque backroom negotiations. These processes did not simply supersede elections but also created situations where corrupt elections merely reinforced the power-sharing decisions made in these private negotiations. As one Afghan NGO worker explained, "You can see how the president assigns a governor to each province and how they can manipulate the election however they want. They use ethnicity and other means to shape the election process." Others complained that government employees, ranging from IEC officials and district governors to school teachers and policemen, campaigned actively for certain candidates or used their positions to help facilitate fraud.

Even when more educated, urban respondents discussed possible means of election reform, there was an overwhelming sense within the data that the possibility of such reforms being implemented (and effective) was slim. As one teacher in Kabul explained, "Electoral laws and the IEC procedures should be changed. . . . The commissioners should be independent and should have a good status and history in the community so that the people will trust the IEC and the election results. What I have been describing, however, is purely theory. What is happening on the ground is another issue, because people may make a lot of good points on paper, but they will not be implemented in practice."

For many, a stable resolution to political transition post-Karzai was more critical than the details of the actual electoral process. This resolution, as described by respondents,

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would include a negotiated political settlement, particularly between Karzai, his allies, and members of the former Northern Alliance. In other cases, HI and, more rarely, the Taliban were also envisioned as part of this settlement. Critically, most respondents did not see the election itself as part of the settlement process. Instead, it was primarily a hurdle to jump over—and a dangerous one, for reasons discussed. For these interviewees, a free and fair election meant one that included the broadest spectrum of political actors possible without leading to violence between groups.

Elections and Transition in 2014

This report has outlined some of the many fears of Afghan respondents about the 2014 elections and in particular the overall concern that the polls might exacerbate existing tensions and internal conflict. Across all the data collected, however, respondents still indicated that the elections would constitute a necessary component of the overall transition. We argue that in order for the elections to take place without adding to insecurity, they must display the following three characteristics: first, they need to function as a mechanism that promotes greater political inclusion than any alternative option; second, they need to continue to act as a symbol of change from the disorder of past regimes; and finally, they need to address the immediate needs of the current transition while simultaneously promoting longer-term political reform.

The Need for Broad Political Participation

Afghans and international observers broadly agree that the main hope for a stable national Afghan government is one that includes as many parties to the current conflict as possible. This is a strong shift from the early post-2001 period when the U.S. government, in particular, pushed for a political system with a strong president, discouraging the meaningful participation of a wide variety of other groups. In comparison, the past five years have seen increasing attempts at reconciliation and “reintegration” programs to bring moderate Taliban forces onto the government side, although these have been largely unsuccessful.

For most respondents, who were clearly concerned about the political uncertainty generated by the elections, the participation of as broad a spectrum of political actors as possible might not, in itself, signal that the elections have been free and fair, but it would symbolize at least an initial desire by those involved to remain or become part of a national process of politics and state building. Electoral participation signals to voters that there is at least a minimal commitment from political actors, ranging from local commanders to national-level leaders to the Afghan government. An inclusive process, involving as many political groups as possible, would make an important statement about the future of the Afghan national government.

On the one hand, even “moderately successful” elections—ones that are able to take place across the country without marginalizing certain people or groups due to insecurity, for example—would be a strong statement in support of a new government that is at least symbolically accountable to a voting public. On the other hand, the refusal of certain key political leaders to participate, coupled with poor voter turnout, would send a clear signal to antigovernment forces of illegitimacy, indicating further opportunities for power grabbing and a means to further benefit from instability.

Elections as a Symbol of Contrast with Past Regimes

Beyond sending a message about what the role of various political actors in the new Afghan government should be, holding and participating in the third round of post-2001 elections should allow Afghans to demonstrate a preference for political order over the anarchy of

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civil war. Wide participation, and in particular the participation of young Afghans, would contribute to this.

Across interviews in all three regions, people talked about the contrast to anarchy and/or quasi-dictatorship that elections symbolized—a contrast that was recognized by respondents of all political persuasions, ethnicities, and ages. For many, the fact that Afghanistan was holding elections, even if imperfect, was a signal to the rest of the world about Afghanistan's desire to turn away from its reputation as an insular and violence-prone state and to embrace what many perceive as international (and also Islamic) values.

If elections are going to contribute toward a stable transition, this potentially widespread support for elections as a mechanism for selecting leaders must be harnessed and encouraged both by the Afghan government and the international community.

The Need to Combine the Current Transition with Long-Term Reforms

Technical reforms of the electoral process are necessary to improve polling, as many international and Afghan election observer reports have detailed. But the kinds of reforms that are feasible within the diminishing timeframe before the next election are unlikely to make a significant difference to the way elections are perceived by Afghans in 2014. Looking back to the distinction that respondents made between local-level fraud and national-scale manipulation of results, it is possible to see how technical reforms—such as the provision of more international observers or a rethink of the way in which voting cards are stamped—would address the first but not the second of these issues. While necessary to rebuilding local confidence in the value of voting in the long term, these reforms will not address the fundamental concerns of elite bargaining and control of outcomes in the short term.

If elections in 2014 are to contribute to a stable transition, they must contribute to negotiations within the peace process by providing a platform for the expression of local community interests. As the authors' past research shows, local communities used elections in lieu of a reliable census to demonstrate size and influence and to generate a sense of entitlement to development aid.²⁴ While perhaps not a conventional approach to elections as might be practiced in the West—and likely still tainted with local-level fraud—this nevertheless demonstrates the way in which polls can be considered useful by local communities as a means to demonstrate their claim to a stake in central government resources.

Such an approach could increase the sense of inclusion of communities within negotiations, both with the Taliban and other political groups involved in the transition. While not eliminating the chances of elite manipulation, this could counter the prevailing perspective that current political negotiations only involve a very small number of elites in Kabul. It would promote the inclusion of local leaders, who could in turn pressure national elites to commit to such a process. In addition, this should be combined with a comprehensive, long-term plan for electoral reform in the mid to long term, including international support to the IEC planned for 2014–17, that is communicated clearly to the electorate. Sending a message about the importance of transparency at the local level will indicate the post-2014 commitment of international actors to the establishment of a trustworthy political system.

Ultimately, by focusing on inclusivity and the symbolic potential and contribution of elections to high-level negotiations, elections could be more firmly embedded within the overall transition. This focus would decrease fears about Afghanistan's political future and encourage groups at all levels to support more transparent and democratic processes. For this to happen, international actors must see elections as an integral part of the political process and not simply as another technical event in isolation from the political landscape in which they are taking place.

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Notes

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1. For example, see Andrew Reynolds and John Carey, *Fixing Afghanistan's Electoral System: Arguments and Options for Reform* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit [AREU], July 2012).
2. For example, see Noah Coburn, *Losing Legitimacy? Some Afghan Views on the Government, the International Community, and the 2009 Elections* (Kabul: AREU, November 2009).
3. Districts studied included: Kabul city (Dasht-e Barchi area), Istalif, and Qara Bagh in Kabul province; Bagram in Parwan province; and Dehdadi, Kaldar, and Mazar city in Balkh province.
4. This project led to approximately a dozen reports on the electoral process published by AREU (see www.areu.org.af). See also Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, *Derailing Democracy: Elections and the Reshaping of the Afghan Political Landscape* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming).
5. For more on some of the background of the areas studied, see Noah Coburn, *Bazaar Politics: Power and Pottery in an Afghan Market Town* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011); Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, *Undermining Representative Governance: Afghanistan's 2010 Parliamentary Elections and Its Alienating Impact* (Kabul: AREU, February 2011); and Noah Coburn, *Parliamentarians and Local Politics in Afghanistan: Elections and Instability II* (Kabul: AREU, September 2010).
6. In general, attitudes toward elections among those interviewed seem to have become universally more negative over the course of the authors' research—specifically, in the lead-up to the 2009, 2010, and now 2014 elections.
7. For more, see Coburn, *Parliamentarians and Local Politics in Afghanistan*.
8. Thomas Ruttig, at a panel discussion titled "Elections, Reconciliation, and the Final Two Years of Afghanistan's Transition: First Panel-Reconciliation," United States Institute of Peace, December 11, 2012. See www.usip.org/newsroom/multimedia/video-gallery/elections-reconciliation-and-the-final-two-years-afghanistan-s-tra.
9. As noted, however, Afghan respondents clearly do not always conceive of political terms such as legitimacy in the same way Westerners do. As a result, this loss of legitimacy had less to do with pure electoral transparency and more to do with the fact that elections did not distribute patronage and government resources in a more predictable pattern. For more, see Anna Larson, *Toward an Afghan Democracy? Exploring Perceptions of Democratization in Afghanistan* (Kabul: AREU 2009); and Coburn, *Losing Legitimacy?*
10. The authors conducted research in Paktya in 2009 and 2010 but were prevented from returning in 2012 due to financial and security constraints. However, reports from this area, which saw a good deal of election violence, fit the trends described in this report.
11. See Reynolds and Carey, *Fixing Afghanistan's Electoral System*.
12. Though this overt and central connection between electoral authority and the expectation of economic benefits for constituents might seem anathema to Western electoral purists, there is certainly sufficient evidence in mature democracies of a less overt, if equally central, connection.
13. "Time to Pack Up," *New York Times*, October 13, 2012.
14. "U.S. Is Open to Withdraw Afghan Force after 2014," *New York Times*, January 8, 2013.
15. For more, see Vanessa Gezari, "The Secret Alliance: A Strange Conspiracy Theory Takes Hold in Afghanistan," *New Republic*, August 19, 2011, and Shahmahmood Miakhel and Noah Coburn, *Myths and Misconceptions in the Afghan Transition*, Peace Brief (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, April 2012).
16. Matthew Rosenberg and Alissa J. Rubin, "Karzai Critic in Congress Is Asked to Cancel Afghanistan Visit," *New York Times*, April 26, 2012.
17. For more on negotiations in France and their potential implications, see Matthew Rosenberg and Taimoor Shaw, "Taliban Hint at Softer Line in Talks with Afghan Leaders," *New York Times*, December 22, 2012.
18. In contrast, he added, "The international community did not support Abdullah because, on one hand, he was not the one who started these projects and, on the other, he was in opposition with the government."
19. For more on these negotiations, Omar Samad, "Complex Afghan Political Consultations," Olive Branch Post, United States Institute of Peace, Washington, DC, December 5, 2012, www.usip.org/publications/complex-afghan-political-consultations.
20. This was revealed through WikiLeaks. See Jason Motlagh, "WikiLeaks' Afghan Revelations: Way Too Familiar," *Time*, November 29, 2010).
21. See, for example, Michael Georgy and Hamid Shalizi, "Billions in Cash Flees Afghanistan, Economy Threatened," *Reuters*, March 13, 2012.
22. To be clear, respondents who had previous experience with Afghan elections all clearly suggested that the results of the ballots legitimately cast did not necessarily reflect the political outcome.
23. See, for example, Democracy International, *Survey of Afghanistan Parliament: Key Findings* (Kabul: Democracy International, 2012) and Reynolds and Carey, *Fixing Afghanistan's Electoral System*. The United Nations Development Programme's ELECT II project is also currently providing interelection capacity building to the IEC, a much-needed improvement on the lack of support between the 2005 and 2009 elections.
24. Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, *Patronage, Posturing, Duty, Demographics: Why Afghans Voted in 2009* (Kabul: AREU, 2009).

