



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL  
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**  
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

# RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: [RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg) or call (+65) 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

No. 056/2014 dated 26 March 2014

## **Afghanistan's 2014 Election: Need for Strong Mandate**

By Halimullah Kousary

### **Synopsis**

*Afghanistan is on the cusp of its first ever non-violent transition of power in its modern history. On 5 April 2014, the third presidential election since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 will be held. What are the prospects for reconciliation with the Taliban?*

### **Commentary**

AFGHANISTAN HAS come a long way politically since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001. It held two presidential elections in 2004 and 2009, and is slated to hold the third on 5 April 2014, which will transfer power to a new president.

Hamid Karzai, after serving his two constitutional terms, is the first elected president to hand over leadership of the state to his successor without being ousted and/or pushed into exile. This shift signifies the growing liberalisation and maturity of the Afghan political elite.

### **Evolution of political order**

In their quest for victory, various political groups have forged alliances beyond ethnicities, regions and political dogmas, forming their presidential teams with the support of former foes. The nine presidential contestants and their teams comprise politicians and power brokers from different backgrounds. They include western-educated technocrats, former Mujahideens and communists. The technocrats with a relatively weak support base have allied with Mujahideens to benefit from their large constituencies across the country.

These alliances are an important sign of the gradual evolution of the current political order in Afghanistan with policies and services taking precedence over personalities and political groups; once male-dominated, they have now become gender-inclusive. One major factor for this has been the growing level of political awareness among Afghan women and youth. Women began voting in the 2004 and 2009 elections and will do likewise in the 2014 election.

Their exposure over the last one decade has rendered their role in the broader political spectrum significant and thus created a need for women participation in elections and their membership in the political groups. Young Afghans, symbolising moderate and pluralistic forces in the country, with many of them educated abroad, constitute the majority of the population. Youth participation in previous elections has driven high voter

registration and voter turnout and youths have developed into a core constituency that will be decisive in the 2014 election.

### **Legitimacy of future government**

However, while a milestone in the fledgling democratisation process, the 2014 election could also lead to an unfavourable aftermath that Afghanistan cannot afford at this critical juncture if it is marred by malpractice.

During its two terms since 2004, the incumbent Afghan government no doubt made headway in certain fundamental areas but due to corruption and malpractice in the 2009 election, the government failed to deliver good governance and create a sense of belonging among the population. The chief concern among Afghans about the coming election is not about which team wins or loses, as there is no major difference in the contestants' positions on principal issues facing Afghanistan today.

They all recognise the need for continued presence of American forces in Afghanistan beyond 2014, and in the meantime want to bring the Taliban to the negotiation table with or without Pakistan's support. These are the two issues that Afghans in general expect the future government to work on.

The concern, however, seems to be whether the 2014 election will be free and fair given the existing security landscape in the country and the Taliban's continued belligerence. The Taliban portrayed the 2014 election as "the latest plot of invaders" to install a "new puppet government". They have intensified attacks on campaign rallies and distributed letters in provinces warning them against voting. Already, at least 408 of more than 7,000 polling centres remain closed and people in 62 districts of 15 provinces would be unable to vote due to high security risks.

### **Need for unity**

The 2009 election was a precedent. The security threats reduced the voter turnout by more the 50 percent from 2004. This led to the massive ballot box stuffing in the 2009 polls. Given that the 2014 election will be held under a worse security condition than in 2009, it would be unrealistic to expect a 100 percent fraud-free election.

But fraud committed on a massive scale will without a doubt undermine the legitimacy of the new government. It could drive the various political groups into mutual recriminations and disunity at a time when Afghanistan needs a government with a strong mandate and a supportive opposition to fight the hostile and foreign-backed Taliban.

*Halimullah Kousary is an Associate Research Fellow with the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. He was previously with the Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies (CAPS) based in Kabul.*