



# BULLETIN

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## 2014 Presidential Elections in Afghanistan: Much Better than Expected?

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*The first round of Afghanistan's presidential elections on 5 April 2014 were of critical importance for the future of the country and its prospects for continued assistance from the West. They mark the end of the 12-year presidency of Hamid Karzai, who created a dysfunctional and weak political system that gave strength to the Taliban. Afghanistan will still face security issues and dependency on foreign economic support. The unquestionable legitimacy of Karzai's successor will also be an important factor in the West's strategic decisions. NATO countries should continue to distance themselves from individual candidates but show strong support for the election process while continuing to work on plans for after the end of the ISAF mission in 2014.*

**Campaign and Elections.** The official campaigns for president started in February 2014, and for provincial councils from March. There is no doubt that the political positioning started even in 2013. Eleven people were permitted to participate in the presidential election, but three resigned before the vote, among them, Qaium Karzai, the brother of the current president. Each candidate chose two additional people for vice-president. The selection of these candidates was a tool to achieve higher votes among all the main ethnic groups of Afghanistan, i.e., Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara.

Contrary to the dominant expectation, the elections had a high turnout—58% of registered voters (seven of 12 million) cast a ballot, the highest in the history of any election in Afghanistan. The higher turnout was achieved mainly because urban and younger Afghans voted in large numbers, with weak participation in rural areas, including in Nangarhar province where the Taliban are still influential. For comparison, the controversial presidential elections of 2009 had an official 38% participation rate, but it was in fact much lower and there was evidence of likely fraud in both the voting and results. The elections of 2004, with a reported 77% participation rate, was certainly not a true picture of the situation then. This year, local and legal realities mean that the presidential elections will take more time. The counting of votes might finish by 20 April and official results announced on 24 April. Some official local results in eastern and southern Afghanistan might also be questioned by citizens or candidates' staffs, which would have an impact on the Higher Election Commission and the final result. By 17 May, the official results of the 5 April elections to local councils might be announced.

**Candidates to Second Round.** If opinion polls are correct, then none of the main candidates will have an absolute majority of votes. That will necessitate a second round for the two candidates with the highest results, likely on 28 May. The final results of the second round and swearing-in of the new president of Afghanistan might be expected in June this year. According to declarations by the main candidates, there is no risk of a situation similar to that in 2009 when the second round was boycotted by Abdullah Abdullah in protest of perceived fraud in favour of Karzai. It might also be expected that before the second round there will be a much sharper debate on the legacy of Karzai, especially on corruption and the dysfunction of the central administration. Even though polls in Afghanistan have their imperfections, it seems clear only about three main contenders remain: Abdullah, Zalmi Rasoul and Ashraf Ghani. Each of these candidates is moderate and has cultivated good relations with the NATO countries.

There is no doubt that the campaign was a clash of the three. Abdullah is from a mixed ethnicity family but is perceived mainly as Tajik. He was one of the leaders of the *mujahedeen* resistance to the Soviets, then a close advisor

to legendary leader Ahmad Shah Masoud and to the Northern Alliance, which struggled with the Taliban in the nineties. He is positively perceived in the West and familiar for his time as head of Afghan diplomacy. Abdullah is supported during the campaign by Mohammed Khan (Pashtun) and Mohammed Mohaqia (Hazara). During the second round, “Abdullah’s troika” will likely compete against Rasoul or Ghani, both supported by Karzai. Rasoul is presented as the preferred candidate of the current president but it is equally possible that Ghani fared better in the first round. Rasoul is Pashtun, was head of Afghanistan’s Security Council and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Rasoul has chosen for vice-presidents Tajik Ahmed Zia Masoud (brother of Ahmed Shah, who was killed by Al Qaeda) and Habiba Sarabi (Hazara), the only woman in this campaign. Ghani is Pashtun and was an expert with the World Bank and an economics professor in the U.S. before becoming head of Afghanistan’s Ministry of Finance. During the campaign, Ghani was accompanied by famous Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum and former Minister of Justice Sarar Danish (Hazara). It is assumed that these three possible “mini-coalitions” would ease ethnic divisions, responsible for much past conflict in Afghanistan.

**State of Security in Afghanistan.** The first round of the elections was not only a challenge for Afghanistan’s civil administration but also a test for the almost 400,000 soldiers and police of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Contrary to 2009, this year’s election stations were not protected by NATO-ISAF troops. There was also a relative low level of violence, contrary to earlier Taliban threats. On election day, four civilians and 12 policemen were killed, though ANSF actions resulted in a high number of deaths among Taliban (reportedly 176 killed). Altogether, the elections were a big propaganda blow for the Taliban, even though in weeks prior to the election they had conducted spectacular attacks, including on the headquarters of the Independent Election Commission and Ministry of Interior as well as against foreigners at the Hotel Serena in Kabul. It would be too early to draw the right conclusions on the current state and future of the Taliban, but the fact is that they are unable to regain military momentum, and so instead of a classic insurgency, they prefer high-profile terrorist attacks. But the overall weak follow-on from the Taliban’s threat delivered during the first round does not mean they will not try to disturb the second round of elections. Before that, it might be necessary to again increase the use of NATO special forces against local Taliban leaders as well as more intensive ISAF logistical and air support for the ANSF.

The results of the presidential elections might also be crucial to the U.S.’s and other NATO countries’ plans for the country, as they are now uncertain with regard to further support for the ANSF and government in Kabul. The main issue is the unsigned agreements with Afghanistan about the legal status of NATO advisory and counter-terrorism missions after 2014. In the context of some decisions by Karzai (he freed a few dozen insurgency leaders and approved of Russia’s annexation of Crimea) there is little chance for his signature on agreements before the swearing-in of his successor. Support for bilateral agreements with the U.S. and NATO by tribal leaders and the leading candidates for the presidency suggest a move away from the “zero option” scenario in which ISAF withdraws all of its forces, with all of its negative consequences for the country’s stability after 2014.<sup>1</sup> It is highly likely that a signature on the bilateral agreements will be one of the first actions of the new president of Afghanistan.

**Conclusion and Recommendations.** The relatively good organisation and high turnout of the first round of the presidential elections, as well as the demonstration of competence of the ANSF, are weakening the Taliban’s propaganda and are factors in the consolidation of gains by NATO and the Afghans. A continuation of these positive trends in Afghanistan is also a strong argument against critics of the ISAF mission in the country. The presidential elections of 2014 might also be an indicator of positive changes in this generation and in the mentality of Afghan society. The success of Abdullah would give an opportunity for deeper changes within the administration in Kabul, but more likely one of the candidates supported by outgoing President Karzai will be the victor. The second round period will still be a serious security challenge for the ANSF and ISAF. The lack of manipulation and fraud on the scale observed in 2009 would not only augment the legitimacy of the new president of Afghanistan but also would have a positive influence on the general perception of the credibility and efficiency of NATO in what has so far been its most complicated combat missions.

Until the official results of the elections are released, it is necessary for the U.S. and NATO to distance themselves from specific candidates for the Afghan presidency. If so, the West might avoid its mistake from the elections in 2009 when the U.S. openly favoured Abdullah and complicated its relations with Karzai for the next five years. The lack of open support for one of the Afghan contenders should not impact much-needed technical and military support for the second round of elections. NATO countries should also avoid premature official statements and commentary, might complicate obtaining the desired compromises or disturb the new balance of political power in Kabul. The success of the Afghan elections might also have a positive impact on the balanced agenda of the next summit of NATO.

In light of the military experience and gains by Poland as part of ISAF, it still a valid recommendation for Polish special forces to remain with NATO’s mission in Afghanistan after 2014. And contrary to the controversy around ISAF in Poland, this mission is important as it builds capital in Polish-American military relations and may be a factor in U.S. calculations towards its tested ally in Central Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> See more in: M.A. Piotrowski, “The Zero Option? Prospects for Further U.S. or NATO Support for Afghanistan,” *PISM Bulletin*, no. 5 (600), 17 January 2014.