



Afghanistan: the crisis after the elections

by Eva Gross

The result of the run-off in the Afghan presidential elections that took place on 14 June – an important step towards completing the country's first democratic transition of power – was supposed to be announced on 2 July. But with accusations of fraud made by Abdullah Abdullah, one of the two presidential contenders, the past weeks have instead witnessed clashes over the validity of the results and the subsequent launching of investigations by the Independent Election Commission (IEC).

Preliminary election results announced on 7 July put presidential candidate Ashraf Ghani in the lead with 59% of the vote, although further investigations of electoral fraud have been promised before the final results are to be released on 22 July and the new president sworn in on 2 August. With the threat of instability and violence growing, US Secretary of State John Kerry (who is due to visit Kabul on 11 July) released a statement calling for a full review of “all reasonable allegations of irregularities” and threatened an end to financial and security support in case of “any action to take power by extra-legal means”.

For international observers, the electoral stand-off poses a serious dilemma: the legitimacy of the democratic process needs to be ensured, yet the longer this political crisis remains unresolved the greater the risk of violence. The crisis not only has the potential to poison the legacy of the international community in the country, it could also undermine future international commitments.

A decent start

Given the widespread fraud that marred the previous presidential elections in 2009, much was riding on the 2014 contest. Initially, things seemed to be going well, particularly when the serious electoral challenges facing Afghanistan – restricted participation for security reasons, irregularities in voter registration and past incidences of ballot stuffing and proxy voting – are taken into account.

The first round of voting, that took place on 5 April, boasted a high turnout (including large numbers of women voters) and saw surprisingly little violence. Inconclusive results, however, led to a run-off between Abdullah and Ghani, who won 45% and 32% of the vote, respectively.

Abdullah, a former Afghan foreign minister of mixed Tajik and Pashtun descent, was Karzai's main opponent in the 2009 presidential election. Ghani, an ethnic Pashtun, initially profiled himself as a pragmatic reformer, building on his work experience with the World Bank and as an advisor to the UN in Afghanistan. He has appealed to northern voters by adding Abdul Rashid Dostum – an ethnic Uzbek warlord with a patchy human rights record – as his running mate, and has consolidated his grip on the largely Pashtun south.

Although international oversight of the election was relatively limited, it did include an EU election observer mission. The US, meanwhile, scaled back

its financial and political commitments so as to foster a sense of Afghan ownership. The process was thus largely Afghan-led: in institutional terms, an election reform law signed by President Karzai in 2013 had removed international membership from the Independent Electoral Complaints Commission (IECC).

An unhappy end

The election put to the test these institutional arrangements – as well as the commitment on the part of Afghan elites to refrain from undue political interference. However, the current allegations of fraud (although likely to have been committed on both sides) clearly indicate the opposite has occurred.

Initial results of the run-off indicated that Ghani was in the lead with around 59% of the vote (almost twice as much as he received in the first round). Abdullah, who gained some 41% (comparable to his first round total), then alleged “industrial-scale fraud”, accusing senior IEC staff of being involved in vote rigging.

Unsurprisingly, Ghani’s campaign team pushed for a speedy announcement of results (although Ghani has come to accept further audits “for the sake of transparency”). Abdullah, for his part, severed ties to the IEC, and demanded that results be withheld until the completion of the investigation. This impasse led President Karzai to appeal to the UN to help mediate in this dispute; a request which was accepted by all parties on 21 June.

As a result, nearly 2,000 of the 23,000 polling stations across 30 provinces that were used in the 14 June vote were audited, with investigators identifying more than 11,000 fraudulent votes in the process – about 60% having been cast in favour of Ghani. But the scope of this investigation was not sufficiently wide-ranging to rule out instances of fraud elsewhere, and Ghani has now agreed to an audit of an additional 7,100 polling places (and up to 3 million votes) that is to be undertaken by the IECC.

A desirable follow-up

Still, Abdullah’s refusal to engage with the IEC and IECC – together with calls by some members of the Abdullah camp for massive protests or even the formation of a parallel government (although rejected by Abdullah himself) – suggests the onset

of a protracted crisis that may lead to violence and lasting divisions in the country.

As far as the international presence in Afghanistan is concerned, the crisis has further delayed the signing of the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with the US, although both candidates have indicated their willingness to eventually sign this agreement.

The delayed outcome of the elections stands in stark contrast to the increasing formalisation of the scope of future EU and NATO commitments. On 25 June, NATO foreign ministers adopted the operation plan (OPLAN) for the future NATO mission *Resolute Support*. The US will deploy 8,000 of its remaining 9,800 troops to contribute to this mission in 2015, while Europeans are set to contribute 3,000-4,000 soldiers and advisors. In 2016, the US military presence will be reduced to 4,900, with troops confined to Kabul and the Bagram base. NATO involvement will subsequently be limited to providing advice at ministerial level in order to strengthen the management of the Afghan security forces.

For its part, the EU has recently finalised its Afghanistan strategy, which was released on 23 June. Accordingly, EUPOL Afghanistan will be phased out completely by 2016 and significantly downsized over the course of the next year. Future EU engagement will focus on several objectives, including promoting peace, security and regional stability; reinforcing democracy; encouraging economic and human development; and fostering the rule of law and respect for human rights, in particular the rights of women and children. The EU relies on a transatlantic security presence for some of these activities, and most of its stated objectives require a minimum level of governance (and peace).

These commitments could now be at risk, although the coming weeks provide an opening for the international community to broker a solution to the current deadlock. The first priority in the current crisis must be to counter rising tensions and avoid the emergence of a lasting confrontation by pushing, *inter alia*, for a negotiated outcome between the contestants and assisting the peaceful transition of power when it occurs. If (and once) an elected government is confirmed and put in place, the international community has an overriding interest in insisting on functioning, independent institutional processes, also with a view to the parliamentary elections in 2015.

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