



Afghanistan: the view from the US

by Eva Gross

The Afghan presidential election that took place on 5 April marks the first democratic transition of power since current President Hamid Karzai took office. It also represents an important milestone for Afghanistan and for international actors operating in the country since the fall of the Taliban. The elections were of particular significance for the US, with Washington having been the primary driver of international engagement – military and otherwise – in the country for over a decade.

Washington views the Afghan elections from the vantage point of post-Karzai US-Afghan relations but, perhaps more importantly, also against the backdrop of shifting strategic and domestic priorities, which render Afghanistan less central to the country's foreign policy than it once was. Still, the election and its outcome promises clarity on the future of US troop strength – and their purpose – in the years to come. This, in turn, will impact on the future presence of both NATO and the EU.

Beyond Karzai

Aside from concerns about achieving a reasonably peaceful and legitimate transition, the decision on the size of a US residual force remains outstanding. In a choice between a near-exclusive focus on counter-terrorism and continued support for the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), the latter would help ensure that the gains made over the past decade are not lost and assist Afghans in providing

their own security – whereas the former would mark a narrowing of US objectives in Afghanistan.

In the weeks and months leading up to the election, Karzai had first delayed and then refused – despite widespread domestic Afghan support – to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) that would allow the US to keep around 10,000 troops in the country. Accordingly, the relationship between President Karzai and President Obama, which could hardly be characterised as warm at the best of times, became increasingly tense.

As a result of Karzai's refusal, the 'zero option' (i.e. a complete US withdrawal with all the concomitant risks) became an increasingly likely scenario for both the administration and NATO. Moreover, his increasingly anti-American rhetoric – ostensibly out of personal conviction, but also part of an attempt to secure his legacy and cut a deal with the Taliban – caused already strained relations with Washington to hit a new low. The change at the top in Kabul thus presents an opportunity to put US-Afghan relations on a more constructive footing, and President Obama has stated that he looks forward to continuing the partnership "with the new government chosen by the Afghan people on the basis of mutual respect and mutual accountability."

The election process

The election itself took place amidst violence perpetrated by the Taliban, who – in addition to calling



for a boycott of the polls – launched a number of successful attacks against Western installations and foreign individuals. Attacks have continued ever since the vote, including one against a truck carrying ballot papers which killed a member of the Independent Election Commission (IEC). Despite all this, however, the turnout was quite significant. Estimates hover around 50% of the population, equating to roughly 7 million people. These numbers demonstrate Afghan resolve and popular support for the democratic process, even if accusations of fraud and procedural irregularities indicate that this is far from a perfect election.

Given the anti-American rhetoric and overall levels of bilateral tension, the US has stood on the sidelines of the election process, although it did make a significant financial commitment. The outcome will not be known for some time yet, and the timeline for a new government taking office remains uncertain. Counting ballots is likely to take several weeks and the IEC is set to announce the results on 14 May. Most observers expect a run-off between two of the three main contenders for the presidency, resulting in a final round already scheduled for 28 May.

A choice of leaders

Whatever the outcome, the election will determine the future interlocutor for any international efforts aimed at strengthening governance, security, and economic development.

The field is narrowed down to three candidates and presidential tickets: Zalmay Rassoul, an ethnic Pashtun, has served as foreign minister in Karzai's cabinet – and his choice of Ahmad Zia Massoud (the brother of the still revered northern resistance fighter Ahmed Shah Massoud) as vice-president provides him with a Tajik political base. Rassoul also has Karzai's backing and, for better or for worse, would probably ensure a degree of continuity.

Ashraf Ghani, a technocrat whose running mate is former warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum (an ethnic Uzbek popular in the north of Afghanistan despite allegations of widespread human rights abuses), would also appeal to northern voters. And the same applies to Abdullah Abdullah, the runner-up to Karzai in the 2009 presidential election who is closely identified with the main Tajik party in the north. Support in the northern region, where voting has been easier and safer than in other parts of the country, is important: not only is the vote likely to be split along ethnic lines, the support of northern power brokers will be crucial in the process of forming a broad-based government. But the backing

of the Pashtuns, the largest group nationally (and dominant in the south and east) is equally, if not more important. The outcome of this three-way race, therefore, will also have implications for internal Afghan cohesion.

Choices for leaders

Ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan was one of President Obama's original campaign promises and remains a key foreign policy objective. The result of the current election will contribute to shaping decisions on the timeline of withdrawal from Afghanistan and the nature of the tasks of any remaining US troops. Internal US discussions also highlight the changing strategic context in which debates on Afghanistan take place. Given these changing priorities – which include the rebalancing to Asia – and the waning support for liberal interventionism, Afghanistan will no longer be at the centre of US strategic engagement. It will, however, continue to influence US counter-terrorism policies and regional engagement throughout South and Central Asia.

While regional stability and the fight against al-Qaeda remain strategic objectives, future US engagement in Afghanistan is set to shift not only to a supporting role (in military terms) but also to a more political and developmental one. The ongoing transition phase requires the next Afghan government, its security forces, and civil society at large to counter the Taliban, fight corruption and underdevelopment, maintain (or improve) internal cohesion, and navigate a volatile regional environment.

A waning American (and Western) military presence in Afghanistan shifts the mode of exerting influence towards diplomatic and economic tools. It also shifts the burden of engagement towards regional actors that, in the likely event of a deterioration of the security environment, will take up the task of fostering cooperation and development in Afghanistan, as well as contributing to Afghan security proper.

As the US recalibrates its engagement in Afghanistan, the EU can look back at extensive cooperation with the US in the country, ranging from election observation to police reform and cooperation on development. The Union can look ahead to continuing such cooperation while strengthening bilateral relations with Afghanistan itself and taking into adequate consideration the positions and likely contributions of its neighbours.

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