

Presidential elections in Afghanistan: a curse or a blessing for democratization?

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The recent presidential election and its attendant circumstances appear to have put paid to the endeavours to democratize and reconstruct Afghanistan. Massive vote rigging, the resurgence of the Taliban, and the conflict between the incumbent, Hamid Karzai, and his challenger, Abdullah Abdullah, are re-viving the question of whether it makes sense for Germany to go on with its engagement in Afghanistan. However, those who advocate 'getting out fast' should not forget that NATO is fighting in the Hindu Kush for human and women's rights and attempting to deprive the radical Islamists of their backing. Doing this task calls for sacrifices as well as time. And the presidential elections are no more than a stage in the process.

When the second presidential-election campaign after the overthrow of the Taliban ended on August 17 of this year, there were 30 candidates for the voters to choose from. Many had resigned in favour of Mr Karzai in the run-up, while others had called upon their followers to support Mr Abdullah. Mr Karzai's campaign was elaborate, but at the same time he attempted to forge alliances with warlords like Abdulrashid Dostum, who is wanted by the human-rights organization for war crimes. On his part, Abdullah Abdullah, a doctor from the Panjir valley who is 48 years of age, showed great commitment, waged an effective campaign, and won over many people.

There had been doubts even in the run-up about whether the elections were being implemented correctly. Doubt was cast on the independence of the electoral commission as well as on the officially-quoted number of voters. Moreover, it was rumoured that clan chiefs intended to sell the votes of their villages in exchange for political positions. Consequently, the secretary general of NATO, Mr Rasmussen, let it be known that the elections were probably not going to conform to the standards one would be 'inclined to apply to elections in allied nations'. Added to this, there was an outbreak of violence: a suicide bombing in which many were killed or injured, a rocket attack on the president's palace, and an attack on a NATO convoy overshadowed the last days before the polls. Lastly, the voters themselves were being brutally intimidated: the Taliban announced that they would hack off any finger that had been marked with ink when their owners cast their vote.

Even on the day of the election, there were attacks in which policemen, soldiers, and civilians were murdered. As many polling stations remained closed for fear of the Taliban, the turnout amounted to no more than 40 percent. Nor were the elections themselves free from irregularities: it was reported that the allegedly indissoluble ink that was used to mark voters' fingers was

in fact easy to remove. Stamping machines designed to mark voting slips did not work, polling stations were blockaded by supporters of Mr Karzai, and ballot boxes were abstracted in the evening by warlords who took them to their own residences to 'replenish'. Even after the elections, reports about manipulation on a grand scale kept piling up, so that the EU observers voiced their doubts about whether the elections had really been free and fair.

Nevertheless, the official result published on September 16 maintained that Mr Karzai had won at 54.6 percent of the vote, whereas Abdullah Abdullah had gathered no more than 27.8 percent. But Mr Karzai's victory is doubtful. Confronted with charges of fraud, the Afghan electoral commission is making preparations for a new voting round.

On the international plane, president Karzai is being increasingly criticized for his lukewarm engagement against corruption and for losing control of large parts of the country. In order to secure his victory and appeal to the diverse ethnic groups and power centres, Mr Karzai employed the tactical finesse of including in his future government representatives of all these groupings, such as Muhammad Qasim Fahim, a Tadjik; Hazara Muhammad Karim Khalili, a Shiite; Abdulrashid Dostum, an Uzbek general; and Muhammad Atta who controls the northern province of Balkh. To a certain extent, this manoeuvre may well have won Mr Karzai nationwide support, but the internal tensions of such a group are bound to show after the formation of the government, if not earlier.

Hamid Karzai wishes to be seen as a symbol of Afghanistan. With a sure eye for effect, he cobbled together his personal presidential uniform from garments worn in all the regions of the country. His bynames, too, impressed people for a time: as late as 2001, he was courted as the 'son of hope' at the Petersburg conference. No more than three years later, people in the Hindu Kush were calling him a 'puppet of the West'. Shortly afterwards the Taliban regained their strength, the reconstruction of the country stagnated, and corruption spread as quickly as the fields where poppy is grown to extract opium from. Popularly degraded to 'mayor of Kabul', doubts about Mr Karzai's personal integrity grew when significant evidence emerged that the president's own brother was involved in drug trafficking.

Even so, Mr Karzai is no bad strategist. Always deft at finding a consensus, he forges a never-ending series of surprising alliances to secure his political survival. He kept aloof from this year's election campaign probably because he wished to evade questions about his faulty policy. Thus, there was no electoral platform and no television duel with his challengers. Abdullah Abdullah, the son of a Pashtun and a Tadjik woman, waged a campaign that was extremely intense and appealing. Present on posters and on the internet, he appeared at rallies and in debates, and he travelled the country –

even to Kandahar, where he encouraged people not to let themselves be intimidated by the Taliban on election day. His opponent, Mr Karzai, he accused of being part of the problem but not the solution.

And indeed, the number of those who were critical of Mr Karzai's governance is growing. The main bones of contention include the integration of warlords in the cabinet, Mr Karzai's putative connections with the opium trade, and the growth of corruption. It was mainly vote rigging which threatened all that had been achieved in the way of stabilization. If the suspicions against him were to be proven correct and Mr Karzai was to remain in office nevertheless, his government could no longer be regarded as legitimate. The consequence would probably be that many Afghans would turn their backs on the existing political system and the strength of the Taliban would grow even further, as they could showcase themselves as an alternative to a demonstrably illegitimate regime.

As yet, the international community is shying away from calling for another election because this would be expensive and not without risk. The lesser evil would be to call a run-off election between the incumbent and his challenger which might give a breath of legitimacy to the elections in retrospect. As winter is threatening, such an initiative would have to be realized soon, and as this is not feasible for logistical reasons, the UN grievance commission has suggested recounting one tenth of the votes.

If Mr Karzai should be confirmed in office, his new term will be fraught with problems. He would not be enjoying the confidence of either the Afghan people or the international community, the opposition around Mr Abdullah and other ex-candidates for the presidential office would step up the fight against the incumbent, and his ethnically-mixed cabinet would probably be almost paralyzed by internal rivalries that have been smouldering among the various ethnic groups for decades.

Three scenarios can be foreseen if Hamid Karzai should remain in office for another term: for one thing, the president has made political promises to many individuals and groups during the election on which he probably will not be able to deliver without difficulty. For another, Mr Karzai's position on the international stage is now so weak that he may well find himself constrained to look for allies in the western regions. Third: the president will probably have to fight on many fronts to ward off his opponents who might even resort to the streets: disappointed voters might band together in demonstrations, which would increase the risk of violent explosions and, consequently, of political destabilization.

Officially, Hamid Karzai is said to have won an absolute majority in the elections with three million votes cast in his favour. However, EU observers state

that no more than 1.8 million people actually voted for him, which would bring his percentage down to 42. Abdullah Abdullah has already called for a run-off poll, which would be won by the candidate that comes out ahead in the first round. If Mr Karzai should win, this would certainly be a wrong signal for Afghanistan's democracy. As is, the country's government as well as the West and the presidential system as such have lost some of their credibility. If Mr Karzai were to win another term, the legitimacy of his office would suffer massively, and the foreign security forces would be decried for supporting an unlawful regime. Therefore, the international community should urgently demand a change of course, for if it did not, it would run the risk of undermining democracy in the Hindu Kush which it laboured so hard to establish.

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