

The US prepares another democratic charade in Afghanistan

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Originally due to take place in June, the election in Afghanistan for the powerful post of president has finally, after two delays, been announced for October 9. But parliamentary elections, which were also to take place in June, have been postponed even further to next April.

Neither election has anything to do with the democratic rights of the Afghan people. Despite claims by Washington that the polls mark a step toward democracy, Afghanistan remains under effective US occupation, with 20,000 American and allied troops throughout the country and a NATO-led International Security Assistance Force of 6,500 troops based in Kabul.

Like the installation of the current President Hamid Karzai, the Afghan people have had no say in deciding the election process. The constitution was drawn up under the supervision of US and UN officials and rubberstamped at a carefully managed *loya jirga*, or assembly of select delegates, late last year. Its purpose is to consolidate a puppet regime in Kabul, loyal to Washington, based on a presidency with extensive, autocratic powers over the state apparatus, including the right to appoint and sack ministers, military officers, judges, diplomats and other top officials.

As a number of critics have pointed out, the timing of the Afghan poll has more to do with Bush's presidential campaign than local politics. Ahmad Shah Ahmadzai, a wealthy Pashtun businessman, complained to the *Washington Post*: "We are sacrificing our elections for the November election in America—otherwise there is no reason to have our election in a hurry. Mr Bush wants to show, 'I am a hero and had an election in Afghanistan'. They are forcing everything for their own election and not for the poor Afghans."

Claims that free and fair elections will be held are absurd. Outside of the capital much of the country remains under the domination of various warlords and militia groups that maintain their local grip through a

combination of fear and patronage. The newly trained Afghan army of 12,000 men and 30,000-strong police force will no doubt be fully mobilised. But these security forces are outnumbered and, in many cases, outgunned by militia conservatively estimated to number 100,000.

In the ethnic Pashtun areas in the south east of the country, there is a growing armed insurgency against the US military presence, with between two and four attacks every day involving the Taliban and other militia groups. UN and Afghan officials seeking to register voters and prepare for the poll have been particular targets. At least 650 people have been killed since the beginning of the year.

In recent comments to the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, President Karzai declared: "Warlord militia are a bigger problem than the Taliban because militias are undermining the institutional buildup in Afghanistan. Militia armies are posing a great threat to that and we have to address and resolve it." In mid-July, he signed a decree aimed at undercutting the country's warlords and militia leaders by insisting that they submit to the program of Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration or be treated as hostile to the government.

Karzai's decision last week to dump his first vice-president, Defence Minister Mohammed Fahim, from his election ticket was viewed as another step toward breaking the influence of militia groups. Fahim, an ethnic Tajik, was a key leader in the Northern Alliance that was exploited by Washington in its military intervention to oust the Taliban regime in 2001. Fahim not only maintains close connections to various warlords and has obstructed attempts to disarm them but, as defence minister, has ensured that his own militias are part of the country's "new" security forces.

NATO troops in Kabul were immediately placed on heightened alert and conducted additional patrols, amid fears that Fahim and his allies might respond with a show

of military force. NATO's reaction underlines the precarious state of affairs that has been created by the US military intervention in the country. The very presence of Fahim and other warlords in the government is a direct product of the Pentagon's strategy over the past three years of arming and funding various militia groups in its campaigns against anti-US insurgents.

Karzai's decision to break with Fahim would only have been taken with US backing. Karzai has no base of significant support and no armed militia of his own. According to a recent poll conducted by the Asia Foundation, Karzai's approval rating is particularly low—just 35 percent—in the southern Pashtun tribal areas from which he comes. The president, whose only qualification for the job was his longstanding ties to Washington, is completely reliant on the US military, including for his own personal security.

Any attempt to marginalise Fahim and other militia commanders will only leave Karzai and his administration even more dependent on the presence of US and other foreign troops. Significantly, the moves to accelerate the disarmament process coincide with a British parliamentary report warning that Afghanistan will become a disaster unless NATO provides more troops. "There is a real danger that if these resources are not provided soon Afghanistan—a fragile state in one of the most sensitive and volatile regions of the world—could implode, with terrible consequences," it stated.

An extra 1,800 NATO troops are already due in Afghanistan to help supervise the election. Far from the upcoming presidential poll being a step toward democracy and independence, it is simply used to consolidate Washington's control over the country. The US ambassador to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, piously declared last month that the election and who will run is a matter for Afghans to decide. But there is no doubt that Khalilzad, along with other US officials and the military, will be pulling out all stops to ensure that Karzai wins.

Karzai is the clear favourite from the outset. In order to garner support from ethnic Tajiks, he has nominated Ahmad Zia Masood, the younger brother of assassinated Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Masood, as one of his vice-presidential running mates. The other is the current Vice President Karim Khalili, an ethnic Hazara. Karzai's main opponent is likely to be Younis Qanuni, who resigned his post as education minister last week and has the backing of Fahim and Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah. All three are senior figures in the Northern Alliance.

In all, some 20 presidential candidates are standing, including Uzbek warlord General Rashid Dostum who has resigned from his post as Karzai's security adviser in order to run. The fact that Karzai is the incumbent in such a fractured field obviously gives him an advantage. More importantly, however, he is widely recognised as Washington's favourite in a country that is completely reliant on US and other foreign aid. According to a UN sponsored report, of the Karzai government's budget of \$4.67 billion this year, just \$300 million will be raised in Afghanistan and the remainder will come from foreign loans and aid.

The French-based organisation Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) recently withdrew from Afghanistan after more than two decades of work in the country. It protested the way in which US aid was being politicised. In a stinging criticism of US methods, MSF warned that the American military was endangering the lives of humanitarian volunteers by blurring the distinction between soldiers and aid workers. Five MSF workers were killed in an attack in June.

MSF operations director Kenny Gluck attacked the way in which US military programs in southern Afghanistan at times promised aid in return for intelligence on Taliban fighters. "MSF denounces attempts to use humanitarian aid to win hearts and minds," he said, adding: "The US-backed coalition has consistently sought to co-opt humanitarian assistance to build support for its own military and political ambitions."

To claim that democratic elections can be held under such conditions is a fraud. Democracy can no more be imposed at the point of a US gun in Afghanistan than in Iraq. The precondition for the Afghan people to assert their basic democratic rights is the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US and foreign troops from the country.



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