

Afghanistan's presidential election: a mockery of democracy

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Confronting a deepening disaster in Iraq, US President Bush has attempted to deflect public attention by pointing to Afghanistan and its presidential poll on October 9 as a beacon of light. Bush's loyal ally in Australia, John Howard, who is up for reelection on the same day, has also hailed the Afghanistan ballot as a success story, demonstrating that the US-led intervention has brought "democracy" to the country.

These empty claims do not, however, bear scrutiny. Every aspect of the election has been marred by bribery, threats and thuggery—not so much by supporters of the ousted Taliban regime, but by US-backed warlords, tribal leaders and militia commanders who have been part of the current Kabul administration, and, in some cases, are presidential candidates. To describe the upcoming Afghan poll as "democratic" is simply a sham.

The US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) issued a report this week detailing the extensive abuse of democratic rights by warlords and their militia in virtually every area of the country. Based on months of research in Afghanistan, it outlines the systematic intimidation of political rivals, journalists, election organisers and the coercive methods used to ensure the support of ordinary voters.

In most of the country, the report concluded, "there remains a high degree of political repression, and politically active Afghans in every region reported that they regularly censor themselves for fear that they might face threats or violence at the hands of factional leaders. The Taliban and other insurgent groups are still considered a serious threat in some southern and southeastern provinces, but most Afghans told Human Rights Watch they primarily fear threats and violence by local armed groups and militias—not the Taliban."

In the eastern areas, for instance, two militia commanders, Hazrat Ali and Haji Zahir, dominate every aspect of life. It is an open secret that these gangsters are involved in a variety of criminal enterprises and abuses, including the seizure of land, theft, kidnapping and extortion. Yet Haji Zahir is allied to current President Hamid Karzai and Hazrat Ali operates closely with US military forces. Both are now engaged in voter intimidation.

An official with the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) told HRW: "[I]f this situation continues and if the powers of warlords such as Hazrat Ali here are not curtailed, the elections will mean nothing. People will see them as an effort to perpetrate the current power arrangements and not as a golden opportunity to get rid of some of the bad people now in power. In politics here today whatever the gunmen want ultimately happens. We don't know what kind of democracy this is."

The same official noted: "One of the major sources of power and authority for Hazrat Ali and his gang is his close relations with the US

military and intelligence. He has successfully used this relationship to harm and intimidate his political rivals. He has arrested people and constantly threatens them with sending them to Guantanamo."

The situation is similar in the northern region around Mazar-e-Sharif, which is dominated by three militia commanders: the Uzbek warlord General Rashid Dostum; an ethnic Hazara faction led by Mohammad Mohaqqiq and the Tajik militia led by Atta Mohammad. The first two are among the 17 candidates challenging Karzai for the presidency. Atta Mohammad is allied to Jamiat-e-Islami, the Northern Alliance faction, which is backing Yunis Qanooni, widely regarded as Karzai's chief rival.

This week, Dostum held one of the few public rallies of the campaign. Some 30,000 supporters were herded into a stadium in the northern town of Shiberghan to hear the candidate absurdly promise, among other things, to defend democratic rights. Dostum is notorious throughout the country for his many atrocities, including the slaughter of hundreds of unarmed Taliban prisoners in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban regime's collapse in 2001. Until he declared his presidential candidacy, he was Karzai's top security adviser.

The US-backed Karzai, an ethnic Pashtun from southern Afghanistan, relies on similar methods. While in these areas political parties and candidates have to contend with armed anti-US insurgents, the main threat still comes from local militia. "Numerous and separate sources in Kandahar, including political organisers, journalists and UN and Afghan human rights monitors, told Human Rights Watch in August that local commanders and leaders have intimidated or threatened political organisers who do not support Karzai's candidacy," the HRW report stated.

A particularly graphic example of the methods used to coerce voters was highlighted last week. A gathering of 300 clan leaders from the Terezai tribe in Paktia province decided to throw their support behind Karzai and broadcast a radio announcement declaring: "All Terezai tribespeople should vote for Hamid Karzai... if any Terezai people vote for other candidates, the tribe will burn their houses." Karzai welcomed their support and extended an invitation to the tribal leaders to visit Kabul, brushing aside criticism of the radio broadcast, saying such warnings were just a tradition and not meant as a serious threat.

Rampant voter intimidation and other corrupt practices will only be compounded by the inadequacy of the formal election procedures. UN and Afghan officials estimated that 125,000 staff would be required to man 5,000 polling sites around the country. The HRW report noted that, as of early September, electoral bodies were still short by 100,000, making it impossible to hire and properly train enough personnel. Already there are indications of widespread multiple registrations by voters. Election officials told HRW that as few as 5 to

7 million of the more than 10 million voter registrations may be genuine.

In many ways, however, the thuggery of the warlords and tribal elders are dwarfed by the scope of the methods used by a far more powerful gangster—the Bush administration. Like these petty local despots, the US does not hesitate to use its military force and effective control over the government's purse strings to call the shots on a broader case throughout Afghanistan as a whole.

The US administration, with the assistance of the UN and the acquiescence of its European allies, has had a major hand in every aspect of the election—from its timing to the drawing up of the Afghan constitution. The Afghan people have had no say in the process whatsoever.

Two elections—for the presidency and the parliament—were due to take place in June, but were twice delayed. Now only the presidential poll will take place on October 9—carefully timed to maximise the benefits for Bush in his own presidential campaign. Significantly, Karzai has rejected calls for a further delay by many of his rivals who have cited the short period of official campaigning and a lack of security as serious impediments to open political debate.

The delay of parliamentary elections until April is even more ominous. Under the constitution, drawn up under the supervision of US and UN officials and rubberstamped by a stage-managed *loya jirga* [tribal assembly], the president has extensive autocratic powers: to appoint and sack the cabinet, military officers, judges, diplomats and other top officials. Parliament provides the only limited check on the president but it will not be in place for six months—at the very least.

Despite its formal profession of neutrality, there is no doubt whatsoever that Washington favours the incumbent. Karzai was installed with US backing in 2002 and for the last two years has demonstrated his complete subservience to his American masters. A private US security firm, Dyncorp, provides his bodyguards, and he is ferried around the country by the US military—privileges that none of his rivals enjoy.

An article published last week in the *Los Angeles Times* makes clear that the US is actively seeking to manipulate the election process. One of the presidential candidates Mohammed Mohaqqiq told the newspaper that US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad had visited his office and, in the course of an hour-long discussion, attempted to talk him into withdrawing his candidacy. “He told me to drop out of the elections, but not in a way to put pressure. It was like a request,” Mohaqqiq said.

The “request” came with a series of offers, which Mohaqqiq turned down, mainly because he regarded them as inadequate. Not satisfied with the answer, Khalilzad approached the Hazara warlord's supporters. Mohaqqiq explained: “He left, and then called my most loyal men, and the most educated people in my party or campaign, to the presidential palace and told them to make me—or request me—to resign the nomination. And he told my men to ask me what I need in return.”

It was not an isolated incident. “It is not only me,” Mohaqqiq explained. “They have been doing the same thing with all candidates. That is why all people think that not only Khalilzad is like this, but the whole US government is the same. They all want Karzai—and this election is just a show.”

Khalilzad has, of course, denied any interference in the election. But Mohaqqiq's remarks were supported by other candidates, who held a meeting last week to discuss the issue. Sadat Ophyani, campaign

manager for Yunis Qanooni, told the newspaper: “Our hearts have been broken because we thought we could have beaten Mr Karzai if this had been a true election. But it is not. Mr Khalilzad is putting a lot of pressure on us and does not allow us to fight a good election campaign.”

The note of resignation in Ophyani's comments reflects the fact that all of the country's powerbrokers, militia commanders and tribal chiefs operate under US overlordship—as they are all well aware. Their government positions and titles, the flow of financial aid to their regions and the continued existence of their militia are all dependent on the support—formally of Karzai, but in reality of the US. Ever since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Khalilzad has been Washington's man on the spot—first as Bush's special envoy, now as US ambassador—manipulating the political situation and ensuring the local warlords toe the line.

In mid-September, amid factional fighting in the western city of Herat, Karzai stepped in to dismiss Ismail Khan as provincial governor. The snap decision provoked an angry reaction from Khan's supporters who mounted a demonstration outside the UN compound in the city. The protest was forcibly dispersed by US and Afghan troops, who killed at least seven of Khan's supporters and wounded 20. While Karzai issued the dismissal, there was no doubt who was pulling the strings. As rioting threatened to get out of control, Khan—at Khalilzad's urging—appeared on local television to calm the protesters.

Pointing to Khan's removal, Khalilzad bragged this week that Afghanistan had “broken the back” of the warlords. In fact, the dismissal of Khan as provincial governor has done little to undermine his power and influence within Herat. He still retains one of the country's largest militias and has accumulated substantial financial resources through his control of the sizeable cross-border trade with neighbouring Iran. As Khalilzad is well aware, the US cannot afford to dispense with warlords like Khan, on which it has relied for the past three years. The dismissal of Khan as governor did, however, provide a timely reminder to all of the country's despots that they hold their fiefdoms under US sufferance.

The result of the October 9 election appears to be a foregone conclusion. But even in the unlikely event that Karzai is forced to a second round and is defeated, his successor will have no choice but to do Washington's bidding. Whatever the outcome, it will certainly not be an expression of the free will of the Afghan people. Yet this electoral charade will no doubt receive the blessing of the United Nations and be triumphantly hailed by the Bush administration as a vindication of its criminal policies.



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