Afghanistan election descends into farce

Peter Symonds
12 October 2004

Even as Afghans were still going to vote in the country's presidential election on Saturday, 15 of the 16 candidates launched a concerted protest over widespread voting irregularities favouring the US-backed incumbent Hamid Karzai. As of today, counting had still not begun as Washington, with the assistance of the UN, attempted to find a way to squash the opposition.

The most glaring flaw involved the indelible ink used to mark the thumbs of those who voted in order to prevent multiple voting. On polling day, it soon became evident that in many cases the ink could be easily washed off. As opposition candidates were quick to point out, this opened the way for ballot rigging on a massive scale. Other irregularities, including under-age voters and political bias by election officials, were also reported.

According to a briefing paper by the US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) last month, multiple voter registration was widespread. UN and Afghan officials told HRW that the overall number of registered voters was "vastly inflated". Of the 10.5 million on the electoral roll, estimates put the actual number of voters as low as 5 to 7 million. The ink was meant as a guarantee that those with multiple registration cards would be unable to use them.

All 15 opposition candidates called for a boycott, urging election officials to stop the polling and to hold the election again. In the cities of Kunduz and Herat, supporters of Yunis Qanooni, regarded as Karzai's main challenger, held protests outside a number of polling booths. In Kabul, one resident told the British-based *Independent*: "There were a lot of violations. In Wardak, one person voted 100 times. If they declare Karzai a winner, it will be a puppet government."

In comments to the *Washington Post*, presidential candidate Homayoun Shah Assefy said he had received many calls from polling places in southern and eastern Afghanistan complaining of irregularities that favoured Karzai. "This was not an accident. It was pre-organised. Yesterday I thought this was an historic day, but unfortunately it was a black day for democracy and the future of democracy in Afghanistan," he declared.

The US and UN quickly stepped in to prevent the protest over the ink debacle from exposing the election as a carefully contrived charade. UN and Afghan election officials rejected calls for voting to be suspended. Behind the scenes, US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad began a round of meetings with opposition candidates aimed at pressuring them to back down. According to the *New York Times*, Khalilzad "suggested" to Qanooni that he "could best help his own political future by not appearing to thwart the will of the Afghans".

Well aware who pulls the strings in Kabul, Qanooni and several other prominent candidates quickly backed down. Qanooni indicated yesterday that he would accept the outcome of a UN investigation into voting irregularities. The UN has already named two of the three so-called independent experts to the panel that will clear the way for the counting of votes to begin.

The outcome of the UN investigation is a foregone conclusion. Election observers—both international and local—have already dismissed complaints of rorting and declared the poll to be legitimate. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) issued a statement branding the opposition protest as "unjustified." It grandly declared: "October 9 was a historic day in Afghanistan, and the millions who came to the polls clearly wanted to turn from the rule of the gun to the rule of law."

However, neither the OSCE nor other observer groups provided any evidence to support their stance. The OSCE contributed 40 of the 230 international observers sent to cover more than 5,000 polling booths throughout the country. Earlier in the year, the OSCE ruled out sending a larger team after an exploratory mission concluded that "the present conditions in Afghanistan are significantly below the minimum regarded by OSCE/ODIHR as necessary for credible election observation."

The Human Rights Watch briefing paper noted: "Remarkably, the [mission's] report recommended that the OSCE should avoid observing the election because it was likely that the monitoring process would uncover substantial flaws and 'challenge public and international confidence in the process'." In other words, the problem was that the election process in Afghanistan was so tainted that the

© World Socialist Web Site

OSCE feared its attempts to whitewash the poll would be rapidly exposed.

US National Security Adviser Condoleeza Rice had no doubt about the findings of the UN panel. She confidently predicted yesterday that "this election is going to be judged legitimate. I'm certain of it." Rice's comments simply underscore the Bush administration's contempt for democratic rights in Afghanistan, just as in Iraq and the US itself. As far as Washington is concerned, the purpose of the Afghan election is to legitimise the continuing US military occupation of the country and its handpicked puppet in Kabul, Karzai.

The poll has been timed to hand Bush a desperately needed "success" in the lead-up to the US presidential election. Keen to deflect attention from the deepening disaster in Iraq, Bush seized on the Afghan election, declaring: "Just three years ago, women were being executed in the sports stadium. Today they're voting for a leader of a free country."

It is absurd to describe Afghanistan as a "free country". The nation remains under effective US occupation, with 20,000 US and allied troops and a NATO-led International Security Assistance Force of 7,000 troops based in Kabul. Over the last three years, US soldiers have roamed the country at will and openly flouted basic democratic rights, arbitrarily detaining and torturing thousands of Afghans. Under such conditions, it is impossible to hold any genuinely democratic election in Afghanistan.

Washington's neo-colonial control of the country rests on a network of relations with regional militia leaders and warlords that assisted the US military in overthrowing the previous Taliban regime in 2001. Many of the more prominent presidential candidates, such as Qanooni, are connected to these petty despots or, like General Rashid Dostum, are warlords themselves. Qanooni, Dostum and others have all served in Karzai's administration and have close relations with the US.

The Human Rights Watch briefing paper documented the coercive methods by which these militia leaders intimidated political rivals and bullied or bribed voters to support their candidates. The report concluded that "in most parts of the country Afghans told Human Rights Watch that they are primarily afraid of the local factional leaders and military commanders—not the Taliban insurgency." As it turned out there were very few insurgent attacks on polling booths on Saturday. No one, however, has reported on the extent to which voters were bludgeoned into voting one way or another by various local thugs.

Karzai is no exception. While his own political base among Pashtun tribes in the south and east of the country is limited, he has the backing of the biggest warlord of them all—the White House and the Pentagon. Karzai has a close association with Washington stretching back to the 1980s when he liaised with the CIA and other US officials on behalf of one of the anti-Soviet Mujaheddin groups led by Seghatullah Mojadeddi. Over the past three years, he has proven himself as a loyal and pliable political tool for the White House.

With Washington's backing, Karzai's election campaign has consisted of bribing and bullying various tribal and militia leaders into ensuring their followers voted for him. A recent *Los Angeles Times* article cited the example of the town of Jaldak where a meeting of elders decided a month ago to back Karzai and sent out their orders. Qanooni's campaign manager Haji Mohammed Hashim complained to the newspaper that those who had wanted to vote for his candidate had been harassed by local police and election officials at the polling booths.

"As you know," Hashim said, "many people around here are not well educated and they can't read or write. They are mostly tyre puncture repairmen and shopkeepers, and whenever they go to vote, they ask for instruction from election officials. And they say, 'Check in front of Karzai's picture [on the ballot]', which is not good. Every person should vote independently and for whomever they want."

While the counting of votes may take three weeks, there is little doubt that Karzai will emerge the victor. With a notorious political manipulator like US ambassador Khalilzad operating behind the scenes, nothing much will have been left to chance. An exit poll conducted in Afghanistan by the US International Republican Institute—an organisation closely connected to Bush's Republican Party—found that Karzai led by a huge 43 percent over his nearest rival Qanooni and would win without being forced to go to a second-round run-off.

To claim this election as "democratic" is a sham. The US State Department denounced the recent elections in Chechnya as "neither free nor fair". But the Chechen election, which took place under a Russian army of occupation and ensured that Moscow's handpicked stooge was elected, was not fundamentally different from the farce that took place in Afghanistan on Saturday. What is described by Washington as "a step towards democracy" and what is decried as "unfair" is completely dependent on how the outcome will advance US economic and strategic interests in the resource-rich Central Asian region.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site