

Afghanistan election: a mockery of democracy

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With the US-led occupation of Iraq sinking further into the quagmire, determined efforts have been made by the Bush administration and the international media to present last Sunday's parliamentary elections in Afghanistan in the best possible light.

US President Bush hailed the poll as "a major step forward" for the country's democratic process. British Prime Minister Tony Blair sounded a similar note, congratulating "the people of Afghanistan for turning out in such numbers" despite Taliban threats. EU external affairs commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner pronounced the election to be "a further milestone on the road to peace and stability".

The international press dutifully followed suit with headlines declaring the election to be "a historic step" or "a milestone" and praising the Afghan people for "defying", "braving" or "refusing to be deterred" by Taliban threats of violence.

Washington is no more creating peace, democracy and stability through its military occupation of Afghanistan than it is in Iraq. The presence of 30,000 US and allied troops in Afghanistan precluded any genuine democratic choice by the country's voters. The election was staged, with the blessings of the UN, to provide a democratic figleaf for the regime in Kabul and to further entrench the position of Washington's puppet—President Hamid Karzai.

Under the Afghan constitution, in which Washington had a major hand in drafting, the lower parliamentary house or *Wolesi Jirga* has limited powers to initiate legislation and to review the budget and government policy. Power is concentrated overwhelmingly in the hands of the president who heads the cabinet and the military, and can appoint and dismiss all ministers, judges and senior officials.

Despite the ineffectual character of the *Wolesi Jirga*, Karzai was determined to ensure that the body would be in no position to challenge his administration. Against the opposition of UN advisers and most diplomats, he insisted on an electoral system that undermined political parties and thus the ability for an opposition to emerge.

None of the 5,800 candidates for the *Wolesi Jirga* or provincial councils were able to identify themselves with a party on the ballot. Furthermore, the voting system based on a single non-transferable vote (SNTV) virtually ruled out the organisation of party slates. The consequence was a farce, particularly in a country where a large segment of voters are

illiterate and thus reliant on identifying candidates by symbol. In Kabul, for instance, voters were confronted with a seven-page ballot paper with 390 names and symbols arbitrarily chosen by lot.

The election result will inevitably be a deeply-divided parliament dominated by "independents" chosen on the basis of local loyalties rather than policies. With Washington's backing and control of the purse strings, Karzai has clearly calculated that such a body would be more malleable. Commenting on Karzai's insistence on the SNTV system, a diplomat told a *Sydney Morning Herald* correspondent: "He wouldn't budge. He claims he can manage a big bunch of independents, and the shifting coalitions they will form, better than a small group of parties who will work the parliament."

US ambassador Ronald Neumann defended the electoral system as "an Afghan decision" to contain the commanders and warlords. Both claims are false. Firstly, the prime architect was not Karzai but Neumann's predecessor, Zalmay Khalilzad, who was intimately involved in installing the Afghan president, drawing up the constitution and determining the timing and method of elections. Khalilzad is now US ambassador in Iraq, supervising Washington's puppet regime in Baghdad.

Secondly, the electoral system has done nothing to rein in the warlords, tribal leaders and militia commanders on whom the US military and the Karzai administration directly rely. While Washington highlighted the danger of Taliban attacks, the main threat to candidates and voters in many areas were warlords and militia leaders closely aligned to the US and the Karzai regime.

A report by the US-based Human Rights Watch released just prior to the election stated: "In addition to fears of Taliban and other insurgent forces, found primarily in the south and southeast, many voters and candidates voiced concerns to Human Rights Watch about their sense of vulnerability at the hands of warlord forces—de facto or official militia forces ostensibly allied with the government..."

"Across the country, candidates and political organisers complained to Human Rights Watch of cases in which local commanders or strongmen, or local government officials linked with them, have held meetings in which they have told voters and community leaders for whom to vote. In some cases, candidates and their supporters allege that direct threats have been communicated."

Warlord candidates

At least 150 warlords or militia leaders stood as candidates. These included those implicated in the brutal factional fighting of the early 1990s, such as the Islamic fundamentalist Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, Hazara warlord Mohammed Mohaqiq and prominent leaders of the Jamiat-i-Islami faction such as Younis Qanooni. Many others, including some candidates for the 68 seats reserved for women, are standing as their proxies.

Although the electoral rules bar candidates involved in war crimes or militia activity, only a handful were excluded. Last week the Electoral Complaints Commission announced that 28 candidates had been disqualified—most for links with illegal militias—on top of 11 blocked in June. The list included none of the top warlords or anyone with close ties to Karzai. The provision is largely a formality as no attempt has been made to prosecute any of those chiefly responsible for war crimes and the main militias have been integrated, officially at least, into the country's security forces.

As part of the effort to undermine support for the armed resistance, Karzai encouraged former Taliban leaders and officials to participate in the election. Those running included Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil, foreign minister for the Taliban regime, and Maulavi Qalamuddin, the head of the Department for the Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue, which was notorious for abusing men and women for breaches of the Taliban's reactionary Islamic codes. Hajji Abdul Samat Khaksar, former Taliban deputy intelligence minister, pulled out at the last minute, only because his Noorzai tribe decided not to back him.

Last week, Karzai blithely dismissed criticisms of the warlord candidates, declaring: "It's opening a new life, a new avenue to the Afghan nation to participate and to differentiate. Now we have that opportunity, freedom to choose, to differentiate." The presence of such candidates, however, makes a mockery of claims that the election was democratic. Those who dominate in the new 249-seat *Wolesi Jirga* will have secured their seat through a mixture of thuggery and bribery.

An editorial in the *Washington Post* last week sought to preempt criticism of the election. The newspaper conceded that "Afghanistan surely has a long way to go", was one of the world's five poorest nations, up to 60 percent of the economy was based on illegal opium production and warlords still held sway in parts of the country. Nevertheless, the editorial declared that the election was "a historic step towards democracy" and concluded that Afghanistan "is immeasurably better off than it was four years ago—and than it would have been had the United States hesitated to act."

Successive US administrations, however, are chiefly responsible for the political, economic and social disaster in Afghanistan. All of the current warlords and armed factions trace their origins to the massive CIA operation in the 1980s to

fund, train and arm Islamic fundamentalist Mujaheddin fighters against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul. In the mid-1990s, the US tacitly supported Pakistan's efforts to organise and arm the Taliban movement that eventually seized power in Kabul in 1996.

Like previous US interventions, the Bush administration's decision to exploit the September 11 attacks to oust the Taliban regime had nothing to do with bringing peace, freedom and prosperity to Afghanistan. The subjugation of Afghanistan and Iraq was part of long-held US ambitions to secure its domination of the resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. The Pentagon is currently spending nearly \$100 million to upgrade and extend its Bagram headquarters and airbase in anticipation of a lengthy US military presence.

For the Afghan people, the ongoing US-led occupation has not brought peace, democratic rights or improved living standards. Despite promises of aid from Washington and its allies, the overwhelming majority of the population is mired in poverty and economic backwardness, lacking even the most basic services. In the south and east of the country, Pashtun villages and towns face the continual threat of US air raids, searches and arbitrary detention. Elsewhere in the country, Afghans are subject to the arbitrary and often brutal rule of warlords and militia commanders.

At the presidential elections last October, more than 70 percent of registered voters went to the polls. Many no doubt hoped that in doing so their life would improve. By exploiting his position as head of the US-backed regime to the full, Karzai comfortably won the election. Today most Afghans are no better off than they were a year ago, or indeed four years ago.

At the election last Sunday, voter participation fell sharply. The first official estimates from about a third of polling stations put the turnout at just over 50 percent. An article by the *Sydney Morning Herald* correspondent in Kabul indicated that the figure could be even lower. Estimates of the fall in turnout ranged from 20 percent to 40 percent in Herat and as high as 60 percent in Kabul.

The low turnout was not primarily due to threats either by the Taliban or local warlords, as voters had ignored similar dangers last October. Rather it reflected a growing disillusion, discontent and outright opposition to Karzai, his backers in Washington and the neo-colonial occupation of the country.



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