

Mass abstention and vote rigging in Afghanistan election

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Yesterday's presidential election in Afghanistan featured massive abstention and blatant ballot rigging, underscoring the corrupt character of the entire exercise. Conducted under the guns of 100,000 foreign troops, the vote had nothing to do with democracy and was instead designed to provide a veneer of legitimacy for the US-led NATO forces' increasingly bloody counter-insurgency campaign against those resisting the occupation.

Preliminary results are not expected until September 3, with final results two weeks later. If incumbent president Hamid Karzai or another candidate fails to win more than 50 percent of the reported vote, there will be a runoff ballot in October between the top two candidates, expected to be Karzai and former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah.

Election commission official Zekria Barakzai told Agence France-Presse that national turnout might reach 50 percent—sharply down from the 70 percent turnout reported in 2004. This year's real participation rate was probably considerably lower than Barakzai's estimate, although the true figure will likely never be determined due to electoral fraud.

Turnout was zero or near zero in parts of Afghanistan's Pashtun-majority south, areas that have seen the worst of the US-NATO onslaught in recent months. The Taliban and other militant groups fighting the occupiers now effectively control large swathes of the country, and were able to enforce their call for a boycott of the presidential election in several areas. Few people voted in other regions in which coalition forces have only tenuous control. In Sangin, Helmand province—currently occupied by British-led forces—the *Times* of London reported that out of 70,000 eligible voters in the district, fewer than 500 people cast ballots.

Incumbent President Hamid Karzai said that the Taliban had conducted 73 attacks yesterday in 15 of the country's 34 provinces. According to other reports, between 20 and 30 people were killed. The *New York Times* reported that insurgents erected roadblocks in one area to deter voting and executed two people in Kandahar whose fingers were stained with the purple ink used to identify voters. These developments came despite efforts by US-NATO and government forces to provide tight security—a total of 300,000 foreign and Afghan soldiers and police were deployed to guard polling stations.

Sections of the US and international media have attributed yesterday's mass abstention entirely to the population's fears over security and possible reprisals from the Taliban. While this was no doubt a factor in some areas, there were similar security fears during the 2004 poll. The election boycott by far broader sections of the population can only be understood as an expression of the widely felt disgust and hostility towards Karzai and the other presidential candidates. His opponents were for the most part corrupt ex-war lords, war criminals, and mafia-type figures vying to become Washington's chosen figurehead.

The Associated Press reporting from one voting centre in Kabul, said it had “swarmed with people in 2004”. This year, however, it “opened on time at 7 a.m.—but with no voters”. Local shop owner Mohammad Tahir said: “I am not voting. It won't change anything in our country.”

Such sentiments were intensified by widespread reports of electoral fraud. About 17 million names were officially registered to vote—greater than one-third more than in 2004. A substantial number of these registrations—reportedly as many as 3 million—were fraudulent. During the election campaign, British

reporters found election cards available for sale in Kabul. An inspection of the voter rolls revealed blatantly faked enrolments—the BBC highlighted the enrolled Afghan voter named “Britney Jamilia Spears”.

Several reports emerged yesterday of people arriving at polling stations with multiple voting cards. In addition, supposedly indelible ink used to mark voters’ fingers proved to be easily washed off with household detergent.

Presidential candidate and ex-World Bank official Ramazan Bashardost responded by calling for the vote to be called off. “This is not an election, this is a comedy,” he declared.

The *Guardian* reported: “It is difficult to underestimate the embarrassment this will cause election organisers after a failure to buy the correct ink for the 2004 poll led to widespread multiple voting. The so-called ink scandal of 2004 caused fury among many voters and election organisers vowed it would never happen again. In a recent attempt to bolster confidence in the election, the local UN chief Kai Eide invited journalists to watch him attempt to remove ink from his finger with a range of domestic cleaners.”

There were also several reports of large-scale ballot stuffing. The *Times* visited a polling station at Haji Janat Gul High School, in Pul-e-Charki, east of Kabul. Arriving less than an hour after the polls opened, reporters waited for another hour without seeing a single person come to vote. Election supervisors nevertheless insisted that 5,530 ballots were cast before the reporters arrived. “In each box there were an oddly uniform 500 to 510 votes,” the *Times* noted. “Assuming that the last voter disappeared at least two minutes before the *Times* arrived at 7.55 a.m., the staff working on the 12 ballot boxes at the site must have been processing at least 100 voters per minute since polling began.”

Sources from the Independent Election Commission later admitted that they were investigating reports that up to 70,000 illegal votes had been cast in polling centres around the Haji Janat Gul polling centre.

The British *Independent* reported from a polling station in Nad-e-Ali, the most populous area of Helmand province: “Call it the mystery of the invisible voters ... just over 400 people had voted by 1 p.m. Three hours later, the figure had apparently surged to some 1,200. This despite the fact the streets were

empty, all shops and businesses were shut and an Afghan army officer saying his men standing guard had hardly seen any civilians heading to these particular voting booths.... Election officials were later seen counting piles of ballot papers, without even checking the choices, simply declaring the votes had been cast for incumbent president Hamid Karzai.”

None of these reports prevented President Barack Obama from endorsing the election. In a White House radio interview yesterday, he declared: “We had what appears to be a successful election in Afghanistan despite the Taliban’s efforts to disrupt it.”

The election outcome will likely soon be followed by the deployment of additional US troops to Afghanistan. There are growing calls from within the military and foreign policy establishment for an intensified offensive aimed at suppressing resistance to the occupation and bolstering US hegemony in the country and throughout Central Asia. Obama has pledged to step up operations in both Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan’s border region. This strategy—involving the use of indiscriminate force against civilian populations in both countries—is driven by US imperialism’s need to maintain its grip over the strategically vital region.

Opposition to Obama’s war drive is escalating among ordinary people in the US. A *Washington Post*-ABC News opinion poll released yesterday found that 51 percent said the Afghanistan war had not been worth fighting, while 47 percent said it had. Just 24 percent agreed that additional troops should be deployed, against 45 percent who said the present number should be reduced.

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