

US fears mount over Afghan election travesty

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26 August 2009

Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission reported Tuesday that preliminary vote tallies from 10 percent of polling stations gave incumbent President Hamid Karzai a slight lead over his main rival, former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah, in the election held August 20.

The commission said Karzai had obtained 40.6 percent of the vote, compared to 38.7 percent for Abdullah. If neither candidate is credited with more than 50 percent of the total votes cast, a runoff election is slated to be held some time in October.

The partial vote tally was overshadowed by mounting reports of pervasive vote-rigging, ballot-stuffing and intimidation of voters by various candidates and their respective ethnic warlord backers.

The evidence of fraud and violence, combined with a turnout that could be as low as 30 percent—10 percent or less in the Pashtun South and East of the country—is raising fears in Washington and other Western capitals that an election staged to provide a veneer of legitimacy to an imperialist counterinsurgency war and a puppet government will only heighten popular opposition to foreign occupation and fuel ethnic and regional divisions in Afghanistan.

The Obama administration is also concerned that the election fiasco will further erode support for the war in the US. Public backing for the war has been falling dramatically according to recent opinion polls. Washington had hoped that the election would facilitate its preparations to sharply increase the US troop presence in Afghanistan and provide a cover for an escalation of military violence against millions of Afghans opposed to the US occupation.

The election could be nothing other than a travesty, given that it was held in a country occupied by nearly 100,000 US and NATO troops, that it excluded from the ranks of the candidates anyone opposing the US-led occupation, and that it was dominated by pro-US war lords and ethnic strongmen who, according to human rights organizations, are guilty of massive crimes both before and since the US invasion that overthrew the Taliban regime nearly eight years ago.

One day after the vote, President Barack Obama hailed the election as a “step forward” for the Afghan people and

called it a “success.” In the ensuing days, American and European officials have backtracked from a blanket endorsement as complaints of vote-rigging by numerous Afghan candidates and reports of election fraud by both Afghan and Western election monitors have proliferated.

The United Nations-backed Electoral Complaints Commission reported Tuesday that it had received at least 1,087 official complaints of irregularities on or after election day. Western newspapers have carried eye-witness reports of polling stations in the Pashtun South and East where virtually no voters appeared, but from which Karzai-appointed election officials sent ballot boxes stuffed with hundreds of ballots to be counted in Kabul.

The Taliban and allied insurgent groups, which control large parts of Afghanistan, including most of the South and East of the country, called for a boycott and enforced it by means of threats and scattered violence. However, the dismal turnout in the South and East was also the result of popular hostility to the occupation and the Karzai puppet regime, which is notorious for corruption and nepotism and has presided over indiscriminate US-NATO attacks on civilians, as well as growing poverty.

Karzai is seeking to secure his reelection by carrying out ballot fraud and cutting deals with militia leaders linked to the Northern Alliance, the front that joined with the US in ousting the Taliban in 2001. Karzai officials estimate, for example, that the incumbent president's alliance with the Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum—notorious for mass killings in the 1990s and the massacre of thousands of Taliban prisoners during the US invasion—will net Karzai 10 percent of the vote.

In the north, which is dominated by Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaris, reports have emerged of local warlords forcing residents to vote for their favored candidates—mainly Abdullah Abdullah—at gunpoint. One of the candidates, former finance minister Ashraf Ghani, has alleged that gunmen associated with Abdullah forced people to vote in the northern province of Balkh. The provincial governor is a former warlord who backed Abdullah.

Both Abdullah and Karzai claimed immediately following the election that they had won more than 50 percent of the

votes, and each is accusing the other of election fraud, setting the stage for a protracted struggle over the ultimate result—to be announced next month—and a possible outbreak of factional warfare. At the same time, Karzai has offered to appoint Abdullah as his foreign minister in his second-term presidency.

To cite one example of rampant ballot stuffing, the *Wall Street Journal* reported Monday: “According to a confidential report made by members of one US observer mission, ballot boxes from Kandahar and the Spin Boldak areas in the south—some of the worst insurgency flash points—are arriving at the electoral commission offices filled with 500 to 600 ballots each, indications of an exceptionally high turnout that doesn’t square with eyewitness accounts of deserted polling stations.”

The *Washington Post* on Tuesday quoted Faizullah Mojadedi, a legislator from Taliban-dominated Logar province, as saying, “In Barkai Barak District, only about 500 people were able to vote out of 43,000 registered voters. In Harwar District, nobody at all was able to vote out of 15,000 registered voters. Yet the ballot boxes from these places came to Kabul full.”

Numerous commentators have noted that the virtual boycott of the election in the South has actually facilitated ballot stuffing by Karzai-appointed election officials in those areas. The *Los Angeles Times* published a column Tuesday by a former aid worker living in Kandahar. The comment, headlined “The Afghan Election Was Rigged,” stated: “Based on the number of my friends who didn’t vote and conversations around town and at prayers, I’d estimate the turnout in Kandahar city was 20 percent at best. Province-wide, in all but three districts, 5 percent would be a generous guess. Total for the province? I’d estimate 10 percent to 15 percent...”

“Low turnout in areas assumed to be pro-Karzai is in fact an open door to vote-rigging. All that’s needed is to declare a turnout that sounds plausible to international ears—say 50 percent—and then fill the boxes up to that number with ballots marked for Karzai.”

On Tuesday, Abdullah showed journalists video footage of election commission workers falsifying ballots for Karzai, according to the *Christian Science Monitor*.

The *Wall Street Journal* summed up the growing concern in Washington over the patently corrupt and fraudulent character of the election, writing: “Some Western officials fear that turnout numbers will be far lower than the 70 percent in the last Afghan election. Low turnout, along with widespread fraud allegations, could hurt the legitimacy of the election further and boost the Taliban...”

The attitude of the US government to rampant electoral fraud was summed up by Richard Holbrooke, Obama’s

special envoy to Afghanistan, who said it was too soon to question the legitimacy of the vote. “We have disputed elections in the United States,” he quipped. “There may be some questions here...But let’s not get out ahead of the situation.” The US, he added, “will respect the process set up by Afghanistan itself.”

In fact, Washington has intervened massively in the elections, seeking to manipulate the outcome so as to force a runoff between Karzai and Abdullah. Despite Karzai’s service as a US puppet, Washington has become increasingly critical of his regime, which it sees as hopelessly corrupt, ineffective and unpopular. The American military has also complained of Karzai’s occasional criticisms of US bombings of Afghan civilians.

The Obama administration is openly discussing installing an unelected “chief executive officer” to oversee the daily functioning of the government, regardless the final outcome of the vote.

The contrast between the US response to the Afghan election and the Iranian election two months ago is stark. In Afghanistan, Washington is downplaying pervasive evidence of fraud and charges by numerous candidates of massive vote-rigging. In Iran, the US government and media immediately embraced charges of a “stolen election” by the pro-Western opposition to incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, without presenting any substantive evidence of fraud.

The difference is to be explained by the foreign policy interests of the United States. In both cases, the overriding aim is to establish US imperialist domination of Central Asia, a region rich in energy resources and occupying a strategically critical position at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East and East and South Asia. But the US considers the Ahmadinejad regime an obstacle to this goal and has sought to use the disputed Iranian election to destabilize or remove the incumbent president, while it has a vested interest in shoring up a puppet “democratic” government in Kabul.



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