

A corrupt election in Afghanistan

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It is widely acknowledged that the August 20 presidential election in Afghanistan will be characterised by vote-rigging and the bribing or intimidation of voters in the areas under US/NATO control. In the ethnic Pashtun southern provinces where the Taliban-led insurgency, which has called for a boycott, is most active, it is predicted that there will be mass abstention. The result will not be credible and the new government will lack any legitimacy.

The head of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Abdul Qader Nurzai, told the *New York Times* earlier this month that he expects a turnout of less than 30 percent in the south. Pointing to the potential scale of the rigging, an anonymous Afghan electoral observer estimated that there are over 3 million duplicate voter registration cards in circulation, or close to 20 percent of the total of 17 million.

Richard Holbrooke, the Obama's administration's special envoy, admitted while in Afghanistan in late July: "We are worried about voter registration fraud, and we are worried about voters who will be unable to reach polling places because of insecurity, and we are worried about the accuracy of the vote count, and we are worried about the ability of women to vote."

The British ambassador to Afghanistan, Mark Sewell, told a press conference on August 5, "We have to recognise that these elections won't be perfect, they won't be up to the standards that they would be in a Western democracy with an educated population."

The current president, Hamid Karzai, is predicted to win the "imperfect" election—possibly with more than 50 percent of the vote, which will rule out a second round run-off ballot.

Karzai is supported by various ethnic-based powerbrokers who backed the US invasion and as a result returned to political prominence. Over the past seven years, under the protection of US and NATO

occupation forces, they have once again transformed the north and west of the country into their personal fiefdoms.

Karzai's campaign is supported by a veritable rogue's gallery of the warlords and tyrants who plunged Afghanistan into years of brutal civil war from 1992 to 1996, before they were driven from power by a Taliban-led insurgency.

Karzai's two vice-presidential running mates are Tajik strongman Mohammad Qasim Fahim and Hazari powerbroker Karim Khalili. Karzai has been endorsed by Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum. All three are accused of war crimes in the 1990s and effectively control the local governments, police, Afghan army units and electoral officials in their respective spheres of influence.

Karzai is also backed by anti-Taliban Pashtun warlord Abdul Rab Rassoul Sayyaf, a fanatical Islamist who was accused of "repeated human butchery" during the civil war. He has also been endorsed by Gul Agha Sherzai, a Pashtun powerbroker whose brutal rule over Kandahar from 1992 to 1994 was a significant factor in fostering support for the Taliban. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation accused him in June of being one of the country's main drug barons.

Elsewhere, in the areas of the Pashtun south under occupation control, Karzai's campaign has rested on money and power that stems from the network of family and tribal connections he has developed since 2001.

Karzai's elder brother, Mahmoud, a US citizen, is now the richest man in Afghanistan as a result of the nepotistic contracts awarded to his businesses. He has been given ownership of the only cement factory in the country and distribution rights for Toyota vehicles. Another brother, Ahmed Wali, has allegedly financed his major business operations and land holdings in Kandahar province through the opium trade.

With a mixture of intimidation and bribery to ensure his victory over 40 other candidates, Karzai has not bothered to take part in the few televised debates screened on Afghan television. He also can rely on a thoroughly subservient media. The state-owned newspapers have devoted 69 percent of their election coverage to Karzai and just 14 percent to his main rival, Abdullah Abdullah.

A Western intelligence official told Elizabeth Rubin of the *New York Times* magazine: “The Karzai family has opium and blood on their hands. They systematically install low-level officials up to provincial governors to make sure that, from the farm gate, the opium is moved unfettered. When history analyses this period and looks at this family, it will uncover a litany of extensive corruption that was tolerated because the West tolerated this family.”

This is the man who has been presented internationally as the symbol of the “democracy” being forged by the US and NATO in Afghanistan.

In recent months, US and NATO politicians, analysts and military commanders have voiced concerns that the corrupt character of the Kabul government has become a major factor in the growth of the Taliban-led insurgency. Millions of Afghans correctly view Karzai as a puppet of the imperialist powers that are attempting to impose neo-colonial rule over the country.

Given the growing criticisms of Karzai, it is entirely possible that the Obama administration will decide to dispense altogether with the pretence of creating democracy in Afghanistan and impose some type of “interim government.”

Statements last week by David Kilcullen, the counter-insurgency advisor to General David Petraeus in Iraq, who has now been appointed as an aide to Afghanistan commander General Stanley McChrystal, point in that direction. He compared Karzai with South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, whom the Kennedy administration had removed from power and murdered in 1963 in a US-backed military coup.

Kilcullen told the US Institute of Peace: “He [Karzai] is seen as ineffective; his family are corrupt; he’s alienated a very substantial portion of the population. He seems paranoid and delusional and out of touch with reality. That’s all the sort of things that were said about President Diem in 1963.”

The corrupt character of the Afghan election, and Kilcullen’s veiled suggestion of a post-ballot coup, serve only to demonstrate that the official justifications for the Afghan war are cynical and threadbare lies.

American and NATO troops are not killing and dying in ever greater numbers for “democracy” or to prevent terrorism. Like Vietnam, the Afghan war is a neo-colonial enterprise. Its aim is to secure Afghanistan as a base of operations for the growing great power struggle for economic and strategic dominance in resource-rich Central Asia.

The neo-colonial war in the region has the potential to trigger open conflict between US imperialism and rivals such as Russia and China which have far greater military capacities than poorly armed Afghan tribesmen.

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