Afghanistan: Further evidence of massive electoral fraud

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Amid widespread evidence of fraud, the Afghan presidential election has become a political debacle for the US-led occupation. While President Hamid Karzai appears on the brink of officially achieving an absolute majority, the final results could take weeks as electoral officials deal with hundreds of complaints. Even if Karzai is finally declared the winner, the Obama administration may decide to dispense with his administration.

On Sunday, the Karzai-appointed head of the Independent Election Commission (IEC), Daud Ali Najafi, announced that just over five million votes were cast, meaning that no more than 30 to 35 percent of eligible voters took part. Of the 3.69 million votes counted, Karzai had won 48.6 percent, with his closest rival, Abdullah Abdullah, trailing on 31.7 percent. If Karzai gains over 50 percent, no second-round run-off will take place.

The remaining votes are primarily from the majority ethnic Pashtun southern provinces where the Taliban insurgency is most active. An avalanche of accusations has been made of open ballot-rigging by pro-Karzai election officials and police. Under conditions in which barely 5 percent of voters in some southern areas turned out, his supporters simply stuffed the ballot boxes.

The *New York Times* reported yesterday that while 350,000 votes had been received from Kandahar province, "Western officials estimated that only about 25,000 people actually voted". A diplomat told the *Times*: "This was fraud en masse." Officials allege that as many as 800 "fictitious" polling stations, which never opened, returned thousands of votes for Karzai.

Last week, the London *Times* reported other claims of fraud in southern Afghanistan. In the Shurawaq district of Kandahar, tribal elders alleged that ballots were not sent to the polling stations but to the local government offices, where 30 men filled them out for Karzai. An elder from Lashkar Gah in Helmand claimed virtually no-one participated in the election, but the "ballot boxes were full of votes for Hamid Karzai". In a district of Paktia province, locals claim election officials stood by as the militiamen of a local tribal leader voted 60 times in a row for Karzai.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported on Sunday that in the Torzai district of Kandahar, Karzai won 100 percent of 4,049 votes. Exactly 500 votes were cast at four of the eight polling stations. At the four polling stations in the Zheri Dasht refugee camp in Kandahar, Karzai won 100 percent of 2,288 votes. The area has only 2,100 registered voters.

The *Times* also drew attention to the Nowzad district of Helmand, where Karzai won 100 percent of the votes, with polling stations reporting 500, 550, 560, 570 and 570 ballots cast.

According to the *Scotsman*, at least 3,000 of the 18,000 polling stations where votes had been counted triggered a fraud alert, which was defined by the IEC as a situation where one candidate won 98 percent of the vote or more than 600 people voted. The Electoral Complaints Commission, which is headed by three international and two Afghan representatives, has already received over 2,600 claims of fraud. It has stopped accepting new allegations, however, as it does not have the staff or resources to investigate the ones made so far.

Before the completion of any investigations, Karzai's appointees on the IEC declared on Sunday that they were only excluding the results from 447 of more than 25,000

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polling stations and considering fewer than 200,000 votes as invalid. A final tally is scheduled to be announced on September 17. The scale of the ballot-rigging in the south is such that analysts cited by the *Scotsman* believe Karzai could end up being awarded as much as 70 percent of the vote.

Abdullah Abdullah, who won most of his votes in the ethnic Tajik and Uzbek northern provinces, accused Karzai of "stealing the election by daylight" and denounced the results as "state-engineered fraud". He stated that he will not accept the outcome and warned that his supporters may take to the streets in protest.

On September 1, Abdullah told the *Times*: "My main concern is that there is a lot of pressure on me for demonstrations. Kandahar wants demonstrations. Khost wants demonstrations. Ghazni wants demonstrations." On Saturday, he declared: "I still urge my supporters to keep calm, but people's patience will run out someday."

On the weekend, Abdullah appealed for an open intervention by the occupying powers to prevent the IEC announcing a result. If his supporters dispute the outcome, it could result in bloody clashes between the rival camps in the northern provinces, where Karzai's re-election is backed by several ethnic Tajik and Uzbek warlords.

One of Karzai's two vice presidential running mates is Tajik warlord Mohammad Qasim Fahim. He was also endorsed by Uzbek strongman Abdul Rashid Dostum. Both men could deploy thousands of militiamen to suppress any challenge to the election result. A significant proportion of the Afghan National Army is also made up of Tajik fighters loyal to Fahim, who commanded the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance forces that fought alongside the US military during the 2001 invasion.

The discussion in US and NATO circles was highlighted by the widely quoted remarks of a "former American diplomat". The unnamed person said last week: "Do they swallow whatever happens and support the winner? Or do they do whatever they need to do behind-the-scenes to force a second round and hope that it's more credible."

The increasingly vitriolic language being used to describe Karzai in the US media and foreign policy circles suggests that the Obama administration is considering not accepting his re-election. *New York Times* correspondent Thomas Friedman, who in 2005 bemoaned the lack of any equivalent to Karzai in Iraq, denounced the Afghan president on September 6 as a "just a different kind of bad" from the Taliban.

US options include pressuring Karzai and his main warlord allies to accept a second round, forming some type of national unity government that includes Abdullah and other rivals, or forcing Karzai and his supporters to step aside altogether. Given that ballot rigging was widely expected, Washington may have intended all along to exploit the election outcome to fashion a more acceptable regime.

The Obama administration has made no secret of its hostility toward the Karzai administration, which it blames for the growing insurgency and popular hostility to the occupation. Karzai has been openly compared in US military circles to South Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem, whom the Kennedy White House had overthrown and murdered in 1963 in a US-organised military coup.

Abdullah may be more palatable to the US and its allies. Like Fahim, he has longstanding ties to a Tajik faction of the Northern Alliance. Fluent in French and English, he served for years as the spokesman abroad of the Tajik warlord Ahmed Shah Masood, who was murdered in 2001. After the ousting of the Taliban regime, he served as Karzai's foreign minister until 2006.

Whatever the outcome of the Afghan election, the sordid affair is a damning indictment of all those who justified the neo-colonial occupation of Afghanistan as the "good war". All their claims that it was bringing democracy, liberation for women and human rights lie in tatters. Karzai's pro-US government, which has been lauded for the better part of seven years, stands exposed as what it always was—a corrupt grouping of warlords and criminals who have no genuine popular support and are kept in power only by the presence of foreign troops. If it is ousted by the US and its allies, its replacement will simply be another illegitimate puppet regime.

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