

UN-backed panel denounces fraud in Afghan election

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An international oversight board has ordered an extensive recount of ballots in Afghanistan's August 20 presidential elections. The announcement comes as ongoing vote-counting has moved Hamid Karzai beyond the 50 percent threshold that would avert a run-off election with his main rival, former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah.

In recent days, voices supporting the US-led military occupation of Afghanistan, led by the *New York Times*, have seized on widespread evidence of electoral fraud to push for the sidelining or removal of Karzai, the longtime US puppet who has fallen from favor with the American military and the Obama administration.

On Tuesday, the Electoral Complaints Commission, a panel whose majority was appointed by the United Nations, called for a systematic recount in response to what it characterized as "clear and convincing evidence of fraud." The commission announced it has fielded over 2,000 fraud charges, of which it says 720 are sufficiently substantial to affect the outcome of the election.

The Electoral Complaints Commission—which consists of a US, Canadian and Dutch representative in addition to two Afghans—has ordered the Afghan election commission to recount votes at every polling station where more than 100 percent of the voting population cast ballots, or where more than 95 percent of all votes were cast for only one candidate.

According to the Afghan electoral commission, which is controlled by Karzai, counted ballots from over 91 percent of precincts show Karzai with 54 percent of the vote. The commission reported that Karzai has 2.9 million votes out of 5.4 million cast, with Abdullah a distant second, with 1.5 million votes. All the other candidates combine for slightly fewer than one million votes. The turnout, according to the commission, was a mere 30 to 35 percent of eligible voters.

Whether or not the recount could result in a run-off election by reducing Karzai's vote total to less than 50 percent is unclear. The Electoral Complaints Commission is vested with the power to nullify the entire election.

Daoud Ali Najafi, Afghanistan's chief election official, said the recount could take two or three months. Other Afghan election officials said they have received conflicting orders on how to carry out the recount.

A Karzai spokesman said that whatever the results of the recount, it would not be enough to reverse the election results. "We have enough of a lead," said Waheed Omer. "We don't think the fraud is so widespread to make a major difference."

The US State Department offered an opposing assessment, with spokesman Ian Kelly at a Tuesday news briefing putting Karzai on notice that the Obama administration views the recount as the decisive phase of the election. "The results of these elections need to be credible and need to reflect the will of the Afghan people," Kelly said. "And as a result, we need to have a rigorous vetting of all of these allegations of fraud."

Another State Department official told Afghan officials to "cool it" in regard to announcing further election results until "you're sure that everybody has confidence in them," *Voice of America News* reported on Tuesday.

An anonymous UN official also declared that Karzai had not yet won and indicated that the results could be overturned. "At this point nobody is a winner," the official told the *Washington Post*. "It is too soon for anyone to start having parties."

A chorus of western officials, speaking on condition of anonymity with major US media sources, adopted strong language to condemn the Afghan electoral process on Monday and Tuesday.

ABC News reported that "a US official and two Western officials in Kabul" charged Afghanistan's election commission with "crossing a red line" by "knowingly" counting fraudulent votes. "That reversal, the Western officials said, came after the commission was 'threatened,'" ABC reported.

The Associated Press and *Washington Post* cited Western officials who claimed tallies arrived from hundreds of precincts in the south that either did not exist or were closed on election day. An official told the Associated Press that the majority of ballots from three southern provinces that voted heavily for Karzai—Kandahar, Paktika and Khost—are fraudulent.

The *New York Times* went further. It reported officials claiming "that in some provinces, the pro-Karzai ballots may exceed the people who actually voted by a factor of 10."

The *Times* also reported unnamed diplomats accusing Afghan election officials of altering a computer program for vote-counting in

order to ensure Karzai would surpass 50 percent of the vote. “He was below 50 per cent when you exclude the obviously fraudulent votes,” one official told the *Times*.

It was the *Times* that on August 29 laid down the outlines of the media campaign against Karzai in an analysis by lead Afghanistan correspondent Dexter Filkins (“Seven Days that Shook Afghanistan”). To that point, the official US position had been that the elections, while problematic in certain respects, represented the “democratic will” of the Afghan people and a “watershed” in their self-rule.

In his column, Filkins warned that “reports of cheating were so numerous, and so substantive, that they could seriously undermine any claims to legitimacy by the eventual winner, whoever it is.” As he made clear, Filkins was referring to Karzai.

“The allegations of vote-rigging brought into focus the extremely difficult position that the Americans face in Afghanistan, and in particular, with Mr. Karzai,” Filkins wrote. “Mr. Karzai has come to preside over a corrupt administration, a deteriorating war, and his country’s transformation into the largest producer of opium in the world.”

This would endanger the Obama administration’s military surge. “The situation on the battlefield is difficult on its own,” Filkins warned. “But it is, of course, inevitably bound up with the political stalemate in Kabul.”

The US posture of shock and anger over rampant electoral fraud is entirely cynical and self-serving. Washington hoped that the election would provide a cloak of legitimacy and “democracy” for its increasingly bloody drive to wipe out growing popular resistance to the US colonial-style occupation. In the face of the election debacle, it is now seeking to utilize election fraud as a pretext for sidelining Karzai and replacing him with a new puppet regime in order to better prosecute its war against the Afghan people.

Karzai is aware that the media campaign, which is clearly being carried out in conjunction with a number of high-ranking US and Western officials, is placing his position in peril. In a recent interview with France’s *Le Figaro*, Karzai singled out the US and British media. “These journalists seek to delegitimize the future Afghan government,” Karzai said.

The incumbent president, who was installed by the US in 2002 following its invasion of Afghanistan, has retained power by forming alliances with war lords who back the US occupation, and who is despised by the Afghan population as a corrupt puppet, is seeking to portray himself as defending Afghan sovereignty against pressure from the US and its NATO allies.

While the election was undoubtedly characterized by virtually every form of electoral fraud, these arose inevitably from a more fundamental source—that the election was carried out under conditions of military occupation and a neo-colonial counter-insurgency campaign. No candidates opposed to foreign occupation were allowed to participate.

The original pretext for the war—to capture Osama bin Laden and other Al Qaeda leaders charged with the September 11 terrorist attacks—has long been abandoned, and the Obama administration has downplayed the Bush administration’s attempt to justify the war as an

exercise in spreading democracy.

What remains is a dirty colonial war aimed at establishing US dominance over a country that occupies a critical geo-strategic position in oil- and gas-rich Central Asia.

The Taliban has continued to gain strength, despite Obama’s military “surge,” in large part because of growing popular opposition to both the US-NATO occupation and its puppet regime in Kabul.

The Karzai regime has overseen and profited from the military operation. But it now appears that Karzai has outlived his usefulness.

In an indication of his increasingly tenuous position, *ABC News* has reported that US ambassador Karl Eikenberry called Karzai in for a meeting late on Monday to express concerns over the government’s role in the manipulation of the election results.

Meanwhile, attacks on occupation forces continued this week. On Tuesday, four US soldiers were killed in eastern Afghanistan’s Kunar province, the US military announced. Since August 1, 65 US soldiers have died. This year has been the deadliest for US and NATO forces since the war began. At least 324 occupation personnel have been killed, 190 of them American.

Also on Tuesday, the NATO wing of the Kabul International airport was attacked by a suicide bomber, killing three and wounding at least six others. Among the wounded were US and Belgian civilians. The attack took place near a heavily guarded gate of the airport, which is used as a conduit for NATO occupation troops. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the bombing.

And, in a reminder that the war in Iraq is far from over, four US soldiers died in Iraq on Tuesday, in separate roadside bomb attacks in Baghdad and northern Iraq.

Last week’s US bombing of ditched oil tankers near Kunduz, carried out at the behest of German troops, killed scores of civilians, underscoring the reality behind the official talk of “protecting” the Afghan people from the Taliban. The criminal character of the war was further exposed on Monday, when a Swedish aid agency revealed that US soldiers stormed a hospital it operates in east-central Afghanistan. The soldiers broke down doors and tied up hospital staff, the agency said. Soldiers demanded that the hospital inform them if those seeking treatment are insurgents, so they could deny them medical treatment.

A spokesman for the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, Anders Fange, called the raid “a clear violation of globally recognized humanitarian principles about the sanctity of health facilities and staff in areas of conflict.”



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