

Afghan presidential candidate demands “caretaker government”

James Cogan
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It is almost certain that no final result in the August 20 presidential election in Afghanistan will be announced on Thursday, as was scheduled. The foreign-dominated Election Complaints Commission is investigating 2,740 separate allegations of ballot-rigging or voter intimidation and has ordered a recount at polling stations where current President Hamid Karzai won 100 percent of the vote or where more than 600 people cast a ballot.

United Nations spokesman Adrian Edwards told Agence France Presse (AFP) on the weekend: “This election is far from over. This has to be an outcome that faithfully reflects the will of the Afghan voters in this election and there is a lot of work still to go on and we can’t prejudge how long that will take.”

Preliminary results published on September 8, based on a count of 92 percent of the votes, showed Karzai winning outright with 54 percent, compared with 28.1 percent for his main opponent, Abdullah Abdullah. The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights reported on Saturday that it believed 1,253,806 of the votes that have been counted—23 percent of the total—could be fraudulent. If these were excluded, Karzai’s vote would fall to 47.48 percent of the total, making a run-off necessary.

And if these votes were disqualified, the total number of the votes cast would be a little over four million out of the 17 million registered voters. Across the ethnic Pashtun southern provinces, where the Taliban insurgency is most active, as few as 5 percent of the population took part in the election. One estimate is that barely 25,000 of the 350,000 votes from Kandahar province are genuine.

The inability to announce a winner poses a major political dilemma for the US administration and its European, Canadian and Australian allies taking part in the occupation of Afghanistan. It could take weeks or months to prepare a second-round election. If it were not held by November, large parts of the countryside would be inaccessible due to winter snow falls, delaying it until next February or March.

Suggesting that the White House was not in favour of another ballot, Obama envoy Richard Holbrooke told the BBC on the weekend that a re-run of the election “ain’t going to happen” and was “out of the question”. He also asserted that any protracted delay in announcing a result would only benefit the Taliban insurgency.

Abdullah, however, is calling for criminal investigations and demanding that a “neutral caretaker government” be installed until a second-round run-off or new election is held. He insists that Karzai’s supporters would rig another poll unless they are cleaned out of various ministries and government positions.

Abdullah has rejected the option of putting aside a new vote in order to form a “national unity” government with Karzai. Speaking to the London-based *Times* on the weekend, Abdullah declared that the ballot-rigging was “worse than a crime, it’s treason”. Karzai, he said, “doesn’t think about the country, he thinks only of himself. He’s been caught red-handed”.

Constitutionally, Karzai’s mandate expired in May, when a ballot should have taken place. It was delayed

until August 20, primarily on security grounds and to provide time for additional foreign troops to be deployed.

A UN official told the *Washington Post*: “Everyone realises now that Karzai has won, but the fraud was so unpalatable that Abdullah will never accept the results. The only hope is to abandon the process and return to the backroom deal, but there is just too much enmity between them for that. There is just no good option in sight.”

Abdullah is continuing to warn that his supporters could take to the streets. “I have urged them strongly not to do that,” he told the *Scotsman*. “They are aware of the fragility of the situation, but nobody will give up their rights.” Some of his backers have allegedly threatened “Iranian-style protests with Kalashnikovs [rifles]”.

Abdullah’s base is among the ethnic Tajik population in the north of the country and his campaign was backed by powerbrokers among the ethnic Hazari community and some Pashtun tribal leaders in the south.

His main supporter is Burhanuddin Rabbani, one of the Islamist warlords who organised the US-backed *mujahaddin* resistance against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The warlords seized power in 1992 and rapidly plunged the country into a murderous civil war. Rabbani held the position of President of Afghanistan in the warlord regime and sought Indian, Russian and Iranian aid against the Pakistani-backed Taliban, which finally overthrew his government in 1996. Human Rights Watch has named him as a war criminal.

Until the US invasion, Rabbani functioned as the president-in-exile for the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. He expected to be put back in power, but the Bush administration chose Karzai instead. He currently heads the parliamentary opposition to Karzai and there is little doubt he would expect to play a role in any “caretaker” government.

Abdullah’s challenge for power has caused concern in Pakistan. Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari all but

declared his support for Karzai’s re-election last week, when he downplayed the claims of fraud in an interview with the BBC. Abdullah has made clear that he would call for tougher action by Pakistan against Taliban insurgents using its border regions as a safe haven and recruiting zone. Pashtun politicians in Pakistan responded by accusing Abdullah of being “from the Indian lobby” and of taking money from the Iranian and Russian governments.

Whatever action the US takes to resolve the crisis, it will only intensify the popular hostility and opposition. The election has simply underscored that the Afghan government is an unrepresentative puppet regime, dominated by corrupt and brutal warlords and completely dependent, politically, economically and militarily, on the US and other major powers.



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