

Afghan election crisis enters new stage

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The crisis surrounding the August 20 presidential election in Afghanistan is set to enter a new stage. The result is scheduled to be announced, after supposedly taking into account evidence of blatant rigging in favour of the current president, Hamid Karzai.

The preliminary result released on September 16 gave Karzai 54.6 percent of the 5.5 million votes cast, out of a possible 15 million registered voters. His nearest rival, Abdullah Abdullah, received 27.8 percent. Karzai's outright victory, if made official, would exclude a second-round run-off and he would be installed for another five-year term.

UN observers, however, have publicly estimated that at least 1.5 million votes were fraudulent. This suggests that far less than 30 percent of the electorate voted and that Karzai received no more than 46 percent. In the ethnic Pashtun southern provinces where the anti-occupation insurgency is most active, as few as 10 percent of voters actually cast a ballot.

Two months after the poll, matters are coming to a head. A decision has to be made over the fate of the US-backed puppet government in Kabul.

The UN-appointed Election Complaints Commission, comprising an American, a Dutch, a Canadian and two Afghan members, has reportedly finished weeks examining questionable ballots. The audit will be sent to Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission to issue the final result, possibly in the next few days.

Within the framework of the Afghan constitution, there are only two options. The EEC can decide to ignore the scale of the fraud and declare Karzai the victor. Alternatively, it can recommend that tens of thousands of votes be thrown out, bringing Karzai's

margin below 50 percent and triggering a second-round election. It is unlikely that a poll could be held before the end of the Afghan winter.

At the end of September, reinstalling Karzai seemed to be the preferred option. The ECC announced that it would only audit 10 percent of the disputed ballots—making it easier to downplay the extent of fraud. Sources told the *Washington Post* that US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had reassured Karzai he would remain president.

Several weeks later, however, the election still poses political dilemmas in the US and Europe where the real decisions will be made. Evidence of blatant poll rigging has undermined propaganda that the US-led occupation was to help “democracy” take root. A majority of people in the US and its European allies now oppose the war.

Differences over how to proceed were on display at a press conference on Sunday by the top UN envoy in Afghanistan, Kai Eide. Flanked by the US, British and French ambassadors, he admitted there had been “significant fraud” in the election, but rejected the claims of his former assistant, Peter Galbraith, that the UN was helping to cover up the scale of the vote-rigging.

Eide ordered Galbraith out of Afghanistan and he was then sacked by the UN at the end of September. Galbraith has subsequently waged a public campaign in the American media, condemning Eide and the election. At least six other senior UN officials in Afghanistan have resigned in support of Galbraith.

Galbraith's comments make clear that the debate over the election is linked to the Obama

administration's deliberations over whether to massively increase the number of US troops in the country. He told the *New York Times* yesterday that the election outcome was "central to the question of whether you send more troops and invest in an enhanced counterinsurgency" as it "requires a credible Afghan partner".

Galbraith's concerns are no doubt widely shared. To keep Karzai as president would only fuel antiwar sentiment in the US as well as deepen the already serious rifts among the pro-occupation factions of the Afghan elite. Abdullah Abdullah has continued to denounce the election as illegitimate and to call for a second-round poll.

In the northern province of Balkh, pro-Abdullah governor Atta Mohammad Noor has stated he would not accept the authority of a Karzai government. There are concerns that open fighting could break out between his supporters and the militia of ethnic Uzbek strongman Abdul Rashid Dostum, who backed Karzai. Fighting could also erupt between rival pro-Karzai and pro-Abdullah ethnic Tajik powerbrokers in the northeastern provinces.

In the ethnic Pashtun south, Karzai's re-election through wholesale fraud would only boost support for the Taliban, especially as thousands more foreign troops pour into the country. The Taliban has always insisted that a government installed by the US invasion could never be anything but a puppet regime.

In Kabul, the crisis over the election result continued this week. One of the two Afghans on the ECC—Supreme Court representative and Karzai appointee Maulavi Mustafa Barakzia—resigned on Monday, denouncing its recommendations as the result of "interference by foreigners". He alleged that the three foreign representatives had been "making all decisions on their own".

A spokesman for Abdullah, Saleh Mohammad Registani, immediately branded the resignation as a ploy by Karzai. "If anything comes out of this that is against Karzai's interests," he declared, "then Karzai will say the Supreme Court member was not present at

the last crucial meetings, so all these decisions were made by foreigners."

Karzai declared on Tuesday that allegations of massive vote-rigging were "totally fabricated". While there had been "irregularities", he said, the election had been "as a whole good and free and democratic". In what amounted to an appeal for US backing, he reiterated his support for the deployment of more American troops to the country.

The US and its main European allies will be the final arbiters of the election result. The decision will not be based on concerns over democracy, but on what best assists the suppression of the insurgency and the consolidation of Afghanistan as a client state in Central Asia.

One option being canvassed is to convene an emergency conference of powerbrokers and tribal heads—a *loya jirga*—to form a national unity government. Such a move would dovetail with suggestions in the Obama administration that, rather than increasing troop numbers, factions of the Taliban be offered substantial bribes to join the government, in exchange for accepting the legitimacy of the US-installed regime and cooperating with it.

Another option, hinted at in US military circles by references to the assassination of corrupt South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963, would be Karzai's removal by similar methods. The US commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, has reportedly advised Obama that a major obstacle to the success of his proposed troop "surge" in Afghanistan is the corruption and illegitimacy of the Karzai government as well as the Afghan military and police force.



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