

US steps up pressure on Karzai over Afghan vote

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An increasingly heated controversy over the rigged election in Afghanistan and the credibility of Washington's puppet, President Hamid Karzai, has intensified the crisis in Washington over the planned escalation of the war in that country.

It was revealed Monday that a United Nations-backed commission's audit of ballots in Afghanistan's August 20 election has confirmed massive fraud on behalf of Karzai, stripping him of his claimed majority.

While the Afghan government's initial ballot count gave Karzai 55 percent of the votes cast—compared to 28 percent for his closest rival, former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah—the analysis conducted by the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) indicates that the real margin was approximately 48 percent for Karzai to 31 percent for Abdullah. The survey found that nearly 1.3 million ballots were fraudulent.

Under the Afghan constitution, a runoff election is mandated if no candidate receives a majority of ballots cast. First, however, the findings of the ECC must be confirmed by the Afghan Independent Election Commission, which is controlled by Karzai appointees. The commission can either accept the ECC's results, thereby paving the way to a runoff, or reject them, supporting Karzai's rigged victory.

The initial reaction in Kabul suggested that the Afghan president might reject the findings, persisting in his claim of an outright majority and refusing to accept a runoff, or, as Washington and its allies appear to prefer, agree to an extra-constitutional power-sharing deal with Abdullah.

The Afghan-controlled commission blocked the scheduled release of the ECC's results on Sunday. Meanwhile, Karzai backers in Kandahar and Ghazni provinces organized demonstrations denouncing "foreign interference" in the Afghan election.

The ECC includes two Afghan commissioners along with one American, one Canadian and one Dutch. One of the Afghans, appointed by Karzai, Mustafa Barakzai, withdrew from the ECC last week, charging it with "foreign interference" and claiming that the non-Afghan commissioners controlled the panel. The resignation was widely seen as an attempt by Karzai to discredit in advance the anticipated findings of wholesale ballot-stuffing.

The ECC threw out results from 210 ballot boxes. Grant Kippen, the Canadian chairman of the ECC, told Reuters that the panel discovered fraud in every province of Afghanistan and that in the ballot boxes thrown out the "degree of fraud was above 50 percent and in some cases it was above 90 percent."

US and other Western officials have mounted a public campaign to pressure Karzai and the Afghan commission into accepting the findings of the UN-backed panel.

Appearing on CNN Sunday, White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel implicitly threatened that there would be no move to boost American troop deployments—an action favored by Karzai—until the election dispute is settled. "It would be reckless to make a decision on US troop levels if, in fact, you haven't done a thorough analysis of whether, in fact, there is an Afghan partner ready to fill that space the US troops would create, and become a true partner in governing," he said.

The statement echoed that of Senator John Kerry, the Massachusetts Democrat who heads the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Kerry, who spent the weekend in Kabul meeting with Karzai, Abdullah and others, said on the NBC program "Face the Nation", "I don't see how President Obama can make a decision about the committing of our additional forces, or even the further fulfillment of our mission that's here today, without an adequate government in place."

Bernard Kouchner, the French foreign minister, was also in Kabul meeting with Karzai and others on the election crisis. "For the moment, we are worried," he told the Associated Press, "because it seems that not everybody is ready to accept the results."

Also speaking to both Karzai and Abdullah on the phone over the weekend were British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Richard Holbrooke, Obama's special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Clinton indicated Monday afternoon that this campaign was having the desired effect. Karzai, she told reporters at the State Department, would "announce his intentions" Tuesday. She declared herself "very hopeful that we will see a resolution in line with the constitutional order in the next several days."

The White House and the Pentagon are no doubt concerned that the continuation of the election dispute is only increasing support for the resistance to the US-NATO occupation by confirming the view among broad layers of the Afghan population that the Karzai puppet regime is corrupt, oppressive and incompetent.

Also of concern is the impact of the crisis on public opinion in the US itself, where the majority of the population opposes the war and is even more strongly against its escalation. The claim that the US is fighting for "democracy" in Afghanistan has been exposed as a lie by the blatant rigging of the August vote.

While pressing Karzai to accept the revised election results indicated in the data submitted by the ECC, Washington and its European allies have no desire to see a second round of voting. A runoff would have to be organized before mid-November—when the Afghan winter sets in—or delayed until spring, a prospect that some Western officials have described as catastrophic. Another vote would also place considerable strain on US military forces in Afghanistan, diverting them from

counterinsurgency operations to protection of polling sites.

In his television appearance, Emanuel made clear that the Obama administration is not demanding a second election as the solution to the political crisis. “Whether that’s through a runoff or whether that’s through negotiations, the process will be determined by the Afghan people,” he said.

While a runoff is required under the Afghan constitution, no one sees this document as an impediment to the US reorganizing things according to its political and military needs. The constitution also mandated Karzai’s removal from office once his term had expired last spring, but he stayed on as president until the occupation forces were able to organize an election in August.

An unnamed Western diplomat in Kabul was quoted by the British *Telegraph* as saying, “The idea now is to reach an agreement in which Karzai’s victory at the first round is accepted, but the condition is that he clean up the corruption in his administration.” Leading figures in the government, including Karzai’s own brother, have been publicly linked with drug trafficking.

What is being pushed is a power-sharing arrangement with Abdullah. According to the *Telegraph*, Abdullah’s camp has already proposed terms for such a deal, having “drawn up an initial wish list of ten ministerial posts and 20 ambassadorships.” Karzai is reportedly unwilling to surrender that much in terms of spoils.

Also arriving in Afghanistan, ostensibly to broker a deal between the two sides, was Zalmay Khalilzad, the Afghan-born US official who was a founding member of the Project for the New American Century and served as George W. Bush’s ambassador to occupied Afghanistan, and later to the United Nations.

“There is every indication that the Obama administration favors a unity government rather than another vote,” Khalilzad told ABC News. He added, “I think the most likely outcome is a unity government, but a government that will take a long time to put together, may not be very strong, and will not be necessarily a very effective partner given the internal disagreements within that government.”

Last May, Khalilzad floated a plan under which he would become the “chief executive officer” of the Afghan government—while keeping his US citizenship—relegating Karzai to a largely ceremonial presidency. The proposal apparently enjoyed at least tentative backing from the Obama administration.

Washington’s principal aim in this pressure campaign is to assert more direct control over its puppet regime in Kabul, which is seen as a major impediment to US counterinsurgency operations.

In his leaked report proposing an escalation of the US war in Afghanistan, Gen. Stanley McChrystal described the Afghan government in scathing terms. “The weakness of state institutions, malign actions of power brokers, widespread corruption and abuse of power by various officials, and ISAF’s [NATO’s International Security Assistance Force] own errors, have given Afghans little reason to support their government,” he wrote, adding that the population sees the occupation forces as “complicit” in this corruption and abuse.

A report putting forward a contrary view to McChrystal’s call for tens of thousands more US troops to be poured into Afghanistan was issued earlier this week by Lt. Col Daniel L. Davis, a former liaison officer between the US forces in Afghanistan and the US Central Command, who is currently assigned to the Defense Intelligence Agency.

Davis suggests somewhat more bluntly that the US must assert more

direct colonial-style control over the Afghan regime in order to carry out successful military operations in the country.

“In recent days we have seen the limits of our best efforts towards rehabilitating the Afghan government with the disaster that was the 20 August presidential elections,” Davis writes, adding, “This state of affairs must be turned around as the cost of government failure is too high.”

The officer continues “Even if we have to roll back some of the sovereignty we previously gave to the Afghan Government, we must do so in order to establish credible, functioning institutions, without which the people of Afghanistan—and indeed even the governing ministers—will never develop a sense of trust in their rulers.”

Davis argues that McChrystal’s proposed escalation will fail because it will not have enough troops to defeat the Afghan resistance, while the addition of tens of thousands of additional US soldiers and Marines will only confirm the Afghans’ view of the occupation force as “foreign invaders,” creating even greater opposition.

“The insurgency in Afghanistan today is spread over hundreds of thousands of square miles of inhospitable terrain and even 40,000 additional fighters would likely be insufficient to militarily stem the tide,” he writes. He argues that at least 100,000 more troops would be required to make any headway, and that the logistical problems posed by such a buildup would mean that the additional forces could not be in place for at least another year—the same 12 months that McChrystal and others have argued are decisive if the US attempt to subjugate Afghanistan is not to be defeated.

Davis notes that the escalation will mean “significant numbers of American combat troops remaining deployed in Afghanistan for another five to 10 years.” The strain of repeated tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, he warns, threatens to reach a “‘deployment exhaustion’ tipping point” that would call into question the viability of an all-volunteer military.

His alternative proposal is for a more aggressive “counterterrorism” program utilizing special forces troops and drone missile attacks and stepping up the training of Afghan puppet forces.



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