

The runoff farce in Afghanistan

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The protracted crisis over the fraudulent election in Afghanistan, culminating in President Hamid Karzai's acceptance last week of a runoff with his top challenger and former foreign minister, Abdullah Abdullah, has once again laid bare the colonial character of the US occupation and the puppet status of the government in Kabul.

The entire degrading process reeks of cynicism. A United Nations-backed panel confirmed that over 1.2 million ballots in the August 20 election were fraudulent—including fully one-third of the votes cast for Karzai. The incumbent's chief challenger, Abdullah Abdullah, is no less venal. Some 200,000 of his own votes were bogus. In areas dominated by his cohorts, ballot-stuffing was just as prevalent as that carried out by Karzai operatives in other regions.

Now the incumbent president is being hailed by the West as a true "statesman" for agreeing to a November 7 runoff that will supposedly lend the presidential election legitimacy.

"President Karzai's constructive actions established an important precedent for Afghanistan's new democracy," declared President Barack Obama. "The Afghan constitution and laws are strengthened by President Karzai's decision, which is in the best interests of the Afghan people."

The only "precedent" established by Karzai's acceptance of the runoff is that Washington can dictate the decisions of its puppet in Kabul, providing it exerts enough pressure.

What was remarkable was the degree of persuasion required: three days of badgering by Senator John Kerry, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee; a 40-minute phone call from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton; and similar interventions by Obama's AfPak envoy Richard Holbrooke, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and Anders Fogh

Rasmussen, the NATO secretary general.

If Karzai held out for so long, it was because he knows how his bowing to the US will be seen by the Afghan people. It will only confirm their conviction that he is Washington's puppet, while suggesting that he has fallen out of favor with his American overlords and that his days may be numbered.

On the surface, there is something peculiar and disproportionate about Washington's intense concern about the legitimacy of the Afghan election. After all, the US government has a long record of overthrowing popularly elected governments that it didn't like, and using CIA dirty tricks and covert financing to rig elections in favor of candidates that it did.

When George W. Bush was decreed president by the US Supreme Court, despite coming in second in the popular vote and in the face of ample evidence of manipulation of the polls in Florida, there was no such fastidiousness about "legitimacy." On the contrary, Democrats agreed to forego any challenge for "the good of the nation."

In the case of the Afghan presidential election, even after the tossing out of over a million ballots, the incumbent Karzai falls just 0.3 percent short of winning an absolute majority. To make good on this statistical anomaly, Washington is proposing a rerun that will cost hundreds of millions of dollars and, in all probability, large numbers of casualties among US troops and an even greater loss of life among Afghan civilians.

Last July and August were the bloodiest months in the eight-year war, as US and other NATO troops were deployed to prepare for the first round of the Afghan election. In July, 76 Western troops were killed and in August, 77. At least 500 US troops were wounded over this same period, many of them seriously.

These soldiers and Marines were told they were fighting for democracy and freedom and to protect the American people from another 9/11. What the events of

the last two weeks have made abundantly clear is that they were really sacrificed in a failed effort to legitimize a US puppet government that is despised by most of the Afghan people for its corruption, incompetence and abuse.

There is every reason to believe that the rerun will be an even less legitimate process than the vote held last August. It is now just two weeks until the date set for the second round. This is not enough time to cobble together an election for a local US school board, much less one for president of a country the size of Texas, in which the predominantly rural population is scattered over inhospitable terrain, which, in some cases, requires the delivery of ballots on the backs of donkeys.

Add to this the fact that the Afghan winter is already threatening to make substantial areas impassable and that the resistance to the US occupation precludes the opening of polling stations in some areas and threatens to unleash violence against those showing up to vote in others. This can only be a recipe for an election that is even more of a farce than the rigged vote two months ago and for a turnout that is even lower than the 30 percent recorded in August.

Whether there will even be a runoff is questionable, as there are more cost-effective methods of reaching Washington's goals.

One possibility, which is increasingly alluded to within foreign policy circles, is the Diem option. Ngo Dinh Diem was the South Vietnamese president who was promoted by Washington as a champion of democracy before his corruption turned him into a perceived liability and he was assassinated in a 1963 CIA-organized coup.

The more openly discussed solution would be a power-sharing deal brokered between Karzai and Abdullah, which would involve a divvying up of cabinet posts and ambassadorships between the two factions and, more fundamentally, the assertion of even tighter control over the puppet regime by the Pentagon and the US State Department.

The entire effort at "legitimizing" the Afghan government while placing it more directly under Washington's thumb is being carried out in preparation for a major escalation of the US war. The Obama White House is expected to announce shortly its decision to pour tens of thousands more troops into Afghanistan as part of the counterinsurgency strategy advocated by

Gen. Stanley McChrystal.

This strategy is predicated not only on wiping out the resistance, but also on winning the Afghan people to the support of the US-backed regime. In his assessment of the Afghanistan war issued in conjunction with the request for as many as 80,000 more troops, McChrystal set the bar fairly low in terms of the quality of this regime.

"Success requires a stronger Afghan government that is seen by the Afghan people as working in their interests," he wrote. "Success does not require perfection—an improvement in governance that addresses the worst of today's high level abuse of power, low-level corruption and bureaucratic incapacity will suffice."

After eight years of occupation, Washington has been unable to achieve even these limited goals. Neither a runoff election nor a power-sharing agreement between Karzai and Abdullah will alter that fact.

The regime in Kabul is not "seen by the Afghan people as working in their interests" not merely because of its pervasive corruption, brutality and incompetence. It is a regime that has been imposed upon them by foreign occupation. It was created to serve not the interests of the Afghans, but those of US imperialism, which is pursuing the strategic goal of asserting its hegemony over Central Asia and the region's vast energy resources.

It is in pursuit of these same interests that the Obama administration is preparing to escalate the killing in Afghanistan.

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