

Fraud, violence and mass abstention: Election debacle in Afghanistan

Patrick Martin
20 September 2010

Saturday's parliamentary election in Afghanistan was a predictable debacle, characterized by widespread fraud and violence, and largely boycotted by the Afghan population. Officials of the US-dominated government of President Hamid Karzai said 3.6 million people cast ballots, far below the 6 million ballots claimed for last year's presidential election, which was rigged to ensure Karzai's reelection.

The 3.6 million ballots represents barely 31 percent of the 11.4 million registered voters, but the Karzai government tried to boost that figure to 40 percent, arguing that the 2.2 million people registered in areas where voting could not be conducted because of security concerns should be excluded from the total of registered voters.

The Independent Election Commission (IEC) has previously said that 16.7 million people have been registered to vote since 2003, which would make the turnout only 21 percent. Whatever number is chosen, however, there is no dispute that the turnout was low, except in certain neighborhoods in Kabul, the capital city, under tight control by US and NATO forces.

Afghan Defense Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak effectively conceded that the political influence of the Taliban was growing, telling the press, in explanation of the low turnout, "One possibility is that the propaganda of the enemy affected the psyche of the people."

The Free and Fair Elections Foundation of Afghanistan, in a statement released Sunday, said it "has serious concerns about the quality of elections." The group mobilized 7,000 people to serve as observers, making it the largest such Afghan-run operation. International observers, who played a major role in exposing systematic ballot-stuffing in last year's presidential vote, largely avoided this year's election because of security concerns and the obvious hostility of the Karzai regime to such monitoring.

"Violence by candidates, their agents and local power brokers was reported in several areas and so were a worrying number of instances of government official interfering in the voting process to sway the results in favour of their chosen candidates," said a statement from the foundation. "Ballot stuffing was seen to varying extents in most provinces, as were proxy voting and underage voting."

According to the foundation, in addition to the 1,053 polling stations that never opened because of security risks, mainly in the south and east, another 1,584 opened late, and many areas, including several entire provinces, had no female election staff, making it impossible for women to vote.

Anecdotal press accounts suggested that there were numerous polling places where observers and candidates greatly outnumbered actual voters.

Anti-fraud measures, such as the supposedly indelible ink in which voters dip their fingers, were ineffective. The ink washed off easily, and many people were able to vote more than once. In Wardak province, one journalist described fistfights between police and election workers, each trying to stuff ballot boxes for favored candidates.

The *New York Times* reported: "At a polling center at the Ghazi Khan High School in Kunduz city, journalists and election observers watched as IEC officials and supporters of some of the candidates locked the doors for two hours and filled out ballots themselves."

The entire election process was fraudulent, however, in a more fundamental sense, over and above the rampant ballot-stuffing. The vote could not be a free exercise of the will of the Afghan population, since it was conducted under the guns of a US-NATO occupation army, and its Afghan stooges.

Moreover, the parliament being chosen has no independence and no capability of resistance to the occupation and the Karzai puppet regime. While 2,500

candidates contested the 249 seats, there were no organized political parties. Nearly every candidate ran as an independent, with loose alliances among those sponsored by particular provincial warlords or top officials like Karzai and Wardak.

The new parliament will be even more subject to official manipulation than its predecessor. Among the decisions that are likely to be rubber-stamped, perhaps after a certain amount of vote-buying, will be a lifting of term limits so that Karzai can run again for reelection, as well as legislation to grant long-term basing rights to American military forces.

Despite the mobilization of 400,000 armed men, counting US and NATO forces as well as Afghan puppet troops and police, there was election-day violence in most provinces of the country. At least 30 people were killed during the day of the voting, including nine policemen, and at least two poll workers kidnapped and murdered in the northern province of Balkh.

NATO announced Sunday that three soldiers died in election-day attacks, including two British soldiers, serving with the Queen's Royal Lancers and the Royal Engineers, killed by a roadside bomb during a patrol in the Lashkar Gah district of Helmand province. They bring the death toll among British forces in Afghanistan to 337 since the invasion and occupation of the country in 2001.

In a sign of the beleaguered character of the puppet regime in Kabul, Karzai canceled plans to meet Sunday with an assembly of local elders and government supporters in Kandahar, the country's second largest city. Karzai's brother Ahmed Wali Karzai is the dominant political figure in Kandahar, reportedly enriching himself from the widespread drug trafficking, as well as a hefty stipend from the CIA, but he could not guarantee security for a presidential visit.

The meeting had been set for the Arghandab district on the western outskirts of Kandahar, the focal point of a major US-led military offensive in recent weeks, which has had limited success. A firefight broke out at the site of the planned meeting, following the explosion of three rockets, and Hamid Karzai did not make an appearance.

According to press accounts, Kandahar was in chaos throughout election day, with explosions heard regularly. The convoy of the local governor, Tooryalai Wesa, was hit by a roadside bomb as he attempted to tour polling places. The Taliban, long powerful in Kandahar, plastered the city on election eve with notices warning people not vote in "Americanized elections" and even supplying two phone numbers to get further information or report

complaints.

While Karzai, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon, the White House, and General David Petraeus, the US military commander, all praised the election and sought to portray it as a success, the normally compliant American media was compelled to admit the obvious.

Time magazine's web site described the election as "A Bad Case of Déjà Vu," comparing it to last year's debacle in the presidential vote. The *Washington Post* wrote that the election "revealed a disenchanted electorate—and a buoyant insurgency."

The *New York Times* stationed correspondent Elisabeth Bumiller in Marja, the district targeted for a major US military offensive in the spring. She reported a tiny turnout in Marja, as low as 10 percent, with heavy fighting between Marines and Taliban guerillas keeping the streets empty.

"By 10:30 a.m., election workers in the polling station at the new Marja high school said that only 27 people had turned up to vote and that the crack of gunfire in the streets was keeping most other people away," she wrote. "As the workers spoke, two booms from rocket-propelled grenades ... sounded close to the polling station. Marines later said that bullets from AK-47 fire were whizzing over the polling station around the same time."

The British newspaper the *Guardian* reported open intimidation of voters in Kabul, as 800 soldiers marched into a polling station at Pul-e-Charki high school to threaten anyone who might vote for anti-government candidates. One local resident, Khaliq Noor, told the *Guardian*, "In the insecure areas of the south people can't vote because of al-Qaida, but in Kabul we have an internal al-Qaida who won't let us vote!"



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact