Afghan election prepares way for new puppet government

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Afghanistan's presidential election was held on Saturday to select a new administration in Kabul that will ratify a bilateral security agreement (BSA) with Washington and facilitate a permanent US military presence in the country following the withdrawal of most foreign troops later this year. All eight presidential candidates indicated that they would sign a BSA, which the outgoing president, Hamid Karzai, who was installed in 2002 and declared the winner of thoroughly corrupt elections in 2005 and 2009, had refused to ratify. Karzai was unable to stand again due to a two-term limit.

The conduct of the 2014 election testified to the failure of more than 12 years of the US-led occupation to stabilise the country under imperialist domination. More than 10 percent of polling stations failed to open, due to fears of attacks by the Taliban and other insurgent organisations. Some 350,000 Afghan Army and police were deployed in a massive show of force and intimidation. The population of the major cities, such as Kabul and Kandahar, were subjected to road blocks, checkpoints and body searches. It is estimated that seven million ballots were cast out of 12 million voters. The turn-out shocked election authorities, who expected it to be far lower. An undisclosed number of the 6,000 polling stations reportedly ran out of ballot papers.

While 690 insurgent attacks were reported, there were no major incidents. The interior ministry stated on Sunday that 89 Taliban, 16 security personnel and four civilians had been killed during the voting. The small scale of Taliban efforts to disrupt the ballot suggests that the insurgent organisations are conserving their forces for the "spring offensive," which is generally launched in late April or May. The number of US troops in Afghanistan is now around 33,000, down from the high point of over 100,000 during US President Barack Obama's surge of forces into the country in 2011. The total foreign troop presence is currently 50,000.

Obama issued congratulations on the so-called success of the election. He declared that the United States "continues to support a sovereign, stable, unified and democratic Afghanistan and we look forward to continuing our partnership with the new government." Coming just weeks after he denounced the referendum in Crimea, claiming that it had occurred under the "barrel of a gun," Obama's praise for an Afghan vote carried out under the scrutiny of a massive US-controlled military mobilisation further underscores the hypocrisy of US foreign policy.

Washington's sole concern in Afghanistan is to ensure that Karzai exits the scene and is replaced with a less erratic puppet. Karzai not only refused to sign a security agreement giving immunity to American troops in Afghanistan but criticised US night raids on civilians and air attacks on alleged Taliban targets. His belated concern for the population, in the final days of his presidency, comes after thousands of Afghan civilians have been killed in such operations, especially in the ethnic Pashtun south of the country where a clique around Karzai gained control of power and wealth as a result of the occupation.

The election outcome is not expected to be known for at least a week. If one candidate fails to poll over 50 percent of the vote, a run-off will be held on May 28 between the two highest polling candidates. The figures expected to win the largest share of the vote are Abdullah Abdullah, Zalmay Rassoul and Ashraf Ghani. All three men have loyally served the US occupation regime and would continue to do so.

Abdullah Abdullah was Karzai's foreign minister

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from 2002 to 2005, before resigning to prepare his own bid for the presidency, most likely with behind-the-scenes encouragement from Washington. In 2009, he polled the second highest vote but refused to contest a run-off against Karzai on the grounds that the first round had been rigged. His party, the Coalition for Change and Hope, brought together a range of ethnic powerbrokers who opposed Karzai's appeals for negotiations with the Taliban-led insurgency. It holds the largest bloc of seats in the Afghan parliament with its strongest base of support from Tajik warlords who formed the Northern Alliance to fight the Taliban in the 1990s. He selected as his one of his vice presidents the ethnic Hazara warlord Mohammad Mohaqiq to secure the Hazara vote. Abdullah declared in March that he would sign the security agreement with the US as soon as he took office.

Zalmay Rassoul served as Karzai's foreign minister from 2010 to 2013 and is widely viewed as a puppet for the clique that enriched itself under Karzai. Qayam, Karzai's brother, withdrew from the election and declared support for Rassoul. Another Karzai brother, Mahmoud, also backed him. Mahmoud Karzai has been accused of plundering hundreds of millions of dollars during the occupation. In the course of the election campaign, Rassoul and his Karzai-clan backers distanced themselves from the president's refusal to sign the security agreement with Washington and committed to doing so if elected.

Ashraf Ghani, an American citizen who returned to Afghanistan after the US invasion, has been widely promoted. He previously worked for the World Bank and the United Nations and at one point was being touted as a possible UN secretary-general. He contested the election in an alliance with the Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum, whose militia is held responsible for the massacre of more than 2,000 Taliban prisoners who surrendered in Kunduz in October 2001.

According to *Washington Post* observers in Kabul, voters largely made their choice along ethnic lines, with Abdullah winning the majority in Tajik and Hazara areas and Ghani polling the most in Pashtun districts. Outside of the major cities, the turn-out was reportedly low.

The signing of a security agreement by Karzai's successor is the precondition for the US military keeping 10,000 to 12,000 special forces and other troops in Afghanistan, and maintaining its use of the strategic and heavily-fortified Bagram Air Base in eastern Afghanistan. The remaining US forces will continue operations to suppress resistance to Washington's puppet government with the Afghan Army and police taking main responsibility for suppressing the Afghan people.

In the course of the occupation, 2,316 American soldiers have been killed, 448 British and 666 from other countries. At least 13,000 Afghan troops and police have been killed—with more than 60 percent of the casualties suffered in the last three years. After years of bloody conflict and savage repression by the occupation forces, the death toll among insurgents and the civilian population runs into the tens of thousands.

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