

Instability set to continue after Afghan presidential election

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No results have yet emerged from Afghanistan's runoff presidential election last Saturday, with only partial results due to be released from July 2, and the final outcome on July 22.

The protracted delay is partially due to the primitive state of the country's infrastructure after nearly 13 years of US-led occupation. But it is also due to hundreds of complaints of electoral fraud, which could determine the expected close outcome of the contest.

Of the candidates, former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah polled 45 percent in April's first round of the election. Ex-finance minister Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai picked up just 32 percent, but later secured the backing of defeated candidates from the country's Pashtun majority.

Whichever of the two pro-US candidates is declared the winner, the election is a fraud on many levels. It was held under the shadow of an intimidating security operation—involving an estimated 400,000 members of the Afghan National Security Forces, as well as the 50,000 US-led foreign troops. According to preliminary official claims, barely 52 percent of the country's registered voters took part.

More fundamentally, the ongoing popular opposition to the 2001 US invasion was not permitted any expression in the poll. Both Abdullah and Ghani—and the other six candidates eliminated in the first round—pledged to ratify a bilateral security agreement (BSA) with the Obama administration. This will permit a permanent US-led military presence following the scheduled withdrawal of most occupying troops by the end of this year.

As far as Washington is concerned, it wants a more reliable puppet than outgoing President Hamid Karzai, who was installed in 2002 and declared the victor of corrupt elections in 2005 and 2009. Karzai was unable

to stand again, because of a two-term limit. In recent years, in order to survive politically, he postured as a critic of the heavy civilian casualties inflicted by the US bombing and drone attacks, and refused to ratify the BSA.

Washington insists that the BSA must include guarantees that no American forces will be liable under Afghan or international law for war crimes carried out in the country. The pact will clear the way for almost 10,000 US troops to remain next year, and at least 1,000 from 2016. They will be spearheaded by special operations squads conducting "anti-terror" operations, backed British and Australian counterparts, and augmented by thousands of private contractors.

Clearly, the kind of operations that resulted in the "friendly fire" deaths of five US special ops soldiers last week, just days before the election, will continue indefinitely in order to suppress widespread opposition to the regime.

Despite its professed "drawdown" from Afghanistan, like Iraq, the Obama administration has no intention of weakening the US domination over the impoverished but strategically critical country, which borders both Iran and China, as well as the former Soviet Central Asian states and the Indian sub-continent.

A statement from the White House cynically claimed that the election was "a significant step forward on Afghanistan's democratic path," while reaffirming "our continuing commitment to Afghanistan beyond 2014."

In general, Western governments and the media proclaimed the election a "success" because it was not shut down by violence by the Taliban, the ousted Islamist regime that has been able to exploit the widespread hostility to the American invasion.

Nevertheless, rocket barrages and other attacks killed

47 people, including Afghan soldiers, according to Interior Minister Mohammad Umar Daudzai. A roadside bomb later on Saturday killed 11 people in Afghanistan, including four election workers.

Journalists reported that the voter turnout in many parts of the country, including Kabul, seemed much lower than during the election's first round, and there appeared to be little enthusiasm for the prospects ahead.

Both candidates pledged to crack down on endemic corruption, but teamed up with key ethnic-based warlords and other powerbrokers who have been enriched by the US takeover. All of them rest on a thin elite layer that has profited from the billions in US cash poured into Afghanistan to shore up the regime over the past decade.

Abdullah's strongest support comes from Tajik warlords who formed the Northern Alliance to fight the Taliban in the 1990s. He has sought to broaden his base. One of Abdullah's two vice-presidential running mates, Mohammad Mohaqeq, is an ex-warlord based on the Hazara minority, while the other is Mohammad Khan, a senior leader of the legal faction of Hezb-e-Islami, an Islamist movement founded by warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

Abdullah, who was Karzai's foreign minister from 2002 to 2005, has many connections to the Western powers, as well as to Karzai's corrupt administration. His backers include Zalmay Rassoul, another ex-foreign minister who is close to President Karzai, Gul Agha Shirzai, a former Pashtun warlord, Ismael Khan, a powerbroker in the country's west, and Mahmood Karzai, one of the president's brothers.

Ghani, a former American citizen, spent years in the US working for the World Bank and the UN before returning to Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban. Finance minister from 2002 to 2004, he was most recently an adviser to President Karzai on the transition of security responsibilities from foreign to Afghan forces.

Widely promoted in the West as a financial technocrat, Ghani won just 2.9 percent of the vote in the 2009 election. This time, his running mate was Abdul Rashid Dostum, an Uzbek former warlord, whose militia is held responsible for the massacre of more than 2,000 Taliban prisoners who surrendered in Kunduz during October 2001.

Ghani's second vice president was a Hazara

politician, Sarwar Danish. Recently, Ghani won the backing of Ahmad Zia Massoud, the brother of a Tajik guerrilla fighter Ahmad Shah Massoud, who died in 2001, and was endorsed by President Karzai's brother Qayum.

Whatever the outcome, the resulting cabal will remain dependent on the US, economically as well as militarily. During the past seven years, US "aid" has accounted for about 75 percent of the country's gross domestic product—with an estimated two-thirds of that siphoned off by US contractors.

After an artificial US-generated boom, centred in Kabul, during which the economy grew by up to 14 percent a year, the World Bank expects growth to slow to 3.2 percent this year, because of declining American spending. Wealthy Afghans have already started shifting assets abroad. US-led efforts to exploit the country's mineral wealth have so far yielded little, with many resources extracted in untaxed, illicit mines.

Most Afghans remain impoverished—the official poverty rate has remained about 36 percent, with the some of the world's worst levels of infant mortality, life expectancy, sanitation facilities and literacy.

One Kabul resident interviewed by the *Washington Post* provided a glimpse of the social reality produced by the US invasion. Mir Ahmad, who fled Helmand province seven years ago and lives in a sprawling camp for displaced people, complained about living in a one-room hut with a plastic tarp for a roof. "Where is the government?" he asked. "Some people are getting rich but we are here, waiting."



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