

Election dispute reignites in Afghanistan

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Just days after the Obama administration declared that diplomatic efforts over the weekend by US Secretary of State John Kerry averted a potential armed clash between supporters of the rival candidates for the presidency of Afghanistan, the two camps are again issuing threats against one another.

Kerry rushed to Kabul last Friday morning for what a State Department official described as “very, very intense, exhausting, but ultimately constructive discussions.” It involved “many, many hours with both candidates and their teams” and “four trips to the palace at various points to see President [Hamid] Karzai.”

The outcome of 44 hours of negotiations was the effective admission by all parties that the June 14 presidential election—which was hailed in Washington and around the world as proof of Afghanistan’s “democratic transition”—was subjected to shameless vote-rigging by officials of the Independent Election Commission (IEC) and the Karzai government. The election fraud sought to ensure the victory of former World Bank official Ashraf Ghani, who was backed by Karzai and various ethnic Pashtun and Uzbek powerbrokers against his opponent, Abdullah Abdullah.

The IEC announced preliminary results on July 7, claiming 8.1 million ballots were cast—well over a million more than estimated by international observers—and that Ghani won easily with 56.4 percent of the vote. Abdullah, who had contested the presidential election in 2009 and 2014 on behalf of an amalgam of Tajik, Hazara and Pashtun powerbrokers, denounced this as a “constitutional coup” and declared himself the victor.

The full extent of the political crisis came to light in a detailed article in the July 14 *New York Times*, co-authored by Carlotta Gall and Matthew Rosenberg, well-connected investigative journalists on Afghanistan and Pakistan. According to their account, Abdullah

supporters in three provinces were on the verge of declaring him president and sending armed forces to seize the presidential palace in Kabul. They were only restrained from doing so by a personal phone call by Obama in the early hours of July 8, warning Abdullah to wait for Kerry to arrive and “not even consider seizing power.”

Gall and Rosenberg characterised last week “as tumultuous a six-day stretch for Afghanistan as any since the American invasion in 2001.”

As a result of Kerry’s intervention, both camps agreed on the weekend to a 100 percent recount of the vote, beginning from Monday. Karzai agreed to United Nations requests that he remain president beyond the August 2 end of his term of office, while his security ministers would keep their positions for three months after a new president is sworn in.

Agreement was also ostensibly reached on a vague revision of the country’s constitution in 2016 to end the concentration of executive power in the president’s hands and transfer authority to a prime minister. Until then, the loser of the election, or their appointee, would be named the “chief executive” and have a day-to-day role in the government.

A *New York Times* editorial on Saturday hailed the deal as “a big relief” that had “pulled the country back from the risk of civil war.” The *Washington Post* editorial declared that the “US political system in Afghanistan was on the brink of collapse, with a new civil war the likely result,” while citing a UN official praising Kerry for achieving “close to a miracle.”

Kerry’s sordid attempt to reconcile the two camps, however, quickly started falling apart. On Monday, vote re-counting was postponed indefinitely. Representatives of Abdullah’s faction insisted they agreed to an audit by international bodies—not the IEC. Ghani and Karzai claimed that Afghanistan’s constitution stipulated that outside parties can be

observers only. Abdullah's vice presidential running mate, ethnic Hazara warlord Mohammad Mohaqiq, told the *Washington Post*: "If the IEC is in charge of this audit, then all these efforts will translate into nothing—a zero."

The White House is facing another foreign policy debacle. It is already confronted by the seizure of swathes of Iraq by the Al Qaeda-linked Islamic State of Iraq and Syria and the collapse of negotiations for the so-called two-state solution between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

After nearly 13 years of US military occupation of Afghanistan since the 2001 invasion overthrew the Taliban Islamist regime, most American troops are scheduled to leave by the end of the year. The withdrawal is predicated on assessments by the Obama administration that the US-trained armed forces of Washington's puppet regime in Kabul can defeat the insurgency led by the Taliban and other resistance organisations, which rages unchecked in the majority Pashtun provinces of southern and eastern Afghanistan.

Instead, the prospect looms of rival pro-occupation Afghan factions using US-trained forces to wage a civil war for control of the government, while the Taliban gains strength.

US imperialism bears full responsibility for this state of affairs. The regime it created in Afghanistan was always based on venal hand-outs to those within the Afghan elite who would collaborate with the occupation against the Taliban. Assorted ethnic and tribal warlords were entrenched in positions of authority that enabled them to plunder foreign financial aid contributions—which account for at least 90 percent of Afghan government revenue. In some cases, this supplemented the income they derived from drug trafficking.

The main factor driving the conflict over the presidency is that foreign cash is dwindling, particularly the amounts that flowed to provincial and local powerbrokers through so-called Provincial Reconstruction Teams and non-government agencies. The faction that controls the central treasury in Kabul will be best placed to channel patronage money to its supporters.

No meaningful economic development has taken place in Afghanistan under the US military occupation. The vast bulk of the population lives in utter destitution

and backwardness, subjected to continuous repression and indiscriminate violence, especially in the areas where the resistance is active.

Yesterday, in one of the worst civilian slaughters of the 13-year occupation, an unknown assailant detonated a truck full of explosives at a market in Paktika, a province bordering Pakistan and a stronghold of the insurgent organisation known as the Haqqani network. As many as 89 people were reportedly killed.

The number of deaths and injuries has soared in 2014 amid intensified fighting between government forces and insurgents. In the past week alone, as many as 100 alleged resistance fighters were killed during US-led Afghan Army operations to push back a Taliban offensive in Helmand, Ghazni and Lagman provinces.



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