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AFGHAN ELECTION, 2010

Alternative Narratives

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1. Introduction

In the context of deteriorating security and following widely controversial elections in 2009, Afghan voters returning to the polls for the *Wolesi Jirga* election on 18 September will be asked to pass judgment on serious political issues at both the national and local levels. The international press has been widely concerned with how fraud and insurgency may delegitimise the election, but for most Afghans this has been only half of the story. Pre-election reports in the media have not considered deeply enough the way in which the election is part of a continual process of reshaping politics in the context of instability in Afghanistan.[1]

More than 2,500 candidates are campaigning in the lead-up to the election for 249 parliamentary seats, in province-wide voting with each province represented by between two and 33 members of parliament (MPs), based upon population.[2] With seats in parliament being perceived as lucrative for both individuals and the communities they represent, this has led to an active campaign period, with thousands of competing posters and television advertisements. It has also led to serious debate, however, among voters and candidates over the current political dissatisfaction and the future of Afghanistan.

This paper provides a brief outline into the alternative but fundamental narratives that were being voiced and heard by Afghans in the run-up to the election. It is based on qualitative research on constituent perspectives on elections, undertaken in Kabul, Balkh and Paktia since January 2010. In particular, the paper argues that:

- Insecurity and rumours of violence have benefited certain candidates while hurting others. Many political actors have been able to use insecurity to their advantage in the election process, and in some cases they are actually encouraging violence that is often glossed over as Taliban insurgency.
- Campaigns are dynamic and reveal how voters and candidates have shifted their understandings of and approaches to elections.
- These campaigns and the election are not simply about winning and losing, but serve as an opportunity for individuals and groups to increase their political capital and, perhaps, in some places, to redefine the balance of power.
- Campaigns reveal deep divides in how Afghans conceive of political authority and reveal the current unsettled state of Afghan politics and feelings about the future of Afghanistan.
- While there are high levels of dissatisfaction with incumbent MPs, it will be difficult for new candidates to win seats, given the way that many have solidified their grasp on power.

1 This paper is part of series on representative democracy in Afghanistan, including, most recently, Anna Larson, "The *Wolesi Jirga* in Flux, 2010: Elections and Instability I" (Kabul: AREU, 2010); Noah Coburn, "Parliamentarians and Local Politics in Afghanistan: Elections and Instability II" (Kabul: AREU, 2010); Noah Coburn, "Connecting with Kabul: The Importance of the *Wolesi Jirga* Election and Local Political Networks in Afghanistan" (Kabul: AREU, 2010); and M. Hassan Wafaey with Anna Larson, "The *Wolesi Jirga* in 2010: Pre-election Politics and the Appearance oqaumf an Opposition" (Kabul: AREU, 2010). Data for this paper comes primarily from a series of over 300 interviews with voters, candidates, current members of parliament and local leaders, primarily in the provinces of Balkh, Kabul and Paktia.

2 For more on the composition of the Wolesi Jirga, see Hassan Wafaey and Larson, "Wolesi Jirga in 2010." For more on the effects of the single non-transferable voting system on Afghan politics, see Grant Kippen, "Elections in 2009 and 2010: Technical and Contextual Challenges to Building Democracy in Afghanistan" (Kabul: AREU, 2008).

2. Taking Advantage of Insecurity

In all provinces studied, security was a clear issue. Furthermore, the assassination of candidates from Ghazni and Herat, attacks on numerous other candidates country-wide, and threats by the Taliban to cut off the fingers of voters all demonstrate how violence has already shaped the approaching elections. Concerns about the potential of Taliban or insurgent groups to disrupt the election, however, oversimplify some of the ways in which insecurity and violence can reshape politics around the election. There are reports of candidates who were former militia heads mobilising their former soldiers to campaign for them. Other rumours of candidates using insecurity and violence to their advantage are abundant. In recent outbreaks of violence between Hazara and Kuchi groups in Kabul, which primarily centred on unresolved land issues, candidates were said to have exacerbated the situation at rallies by suggesting that current representatives had not defended the rights of their communities.

In provinces where there were both secure and insecure districts, it was widely believed that incumbents had a significant advantage over new candidates. This is because current MPs are provided with police protection and have an easier time registering arms than most new candidates. Elsewhere, the difficulty in separating insurgent violence from violence motivated by local concerns has been used by local actors to disrupt current campaigns. For example, in Paktia it was commonly believed that several candidates who were unlikely to win had been directly contributing to violence in the area, in order to jeopardise the campaigns of stronger candidates. As one voter described the security conditions, “Now candidates cannot go to certain areas and campaign, but deteriorating security is not only due to the Taliban. Some candidates are involved in creating this insecurity to disrupt the campaigns of others.” Others speculated that it was primarily candidates who thought they would lose who were contributing to insecurity, in the hope of discrediting the entire election. Additionally, the fact that the Independent Election Commission (IEC) has already declared that stations in insecure areas will be closed has further complicated the politics of insecurity.[3] For instance, in a province in the north of the country there was a common rumour that the provincial governor, who is Tajik, was indirectly assisting insurgents in several Pashtun districts, in the hope that this would lead the IEC to shut down more polling stations in that district and give the candidates he supports a better chance to win.

3 At the time of writing the IEC had announced that 916 out of 6,830 stations would be closed, though this number seems likely to change.

3. Innovation and Imitation: Adapting Campaigning

Recent campaigns have also revealed how political strategies among both candidates and voters in Afghanistan are far from stable, and there has been a significant amount of both innovation and imitation as candidates attempt to mobilise voters. On a superficial level, there are changes in the ways that candidates present themselves publicly, including increased outreach using a variety of media such as television, radio and Internet. Even the ever-present campaign posters are being used in slightly different ways. For example, in the 2009 provincial council campaigns there were some candidates who put their photographs on posters with other Afghan figures (such as former President Daoud Khan or current Hazara leader Mohammad Mohaqqeq) in the background to suggest a personal or political connection with the figure. In 2010 this practice has increased significantly, and many candidates are publicly displaying their association with such figures, sometimes with multiple figures on the same poster. With most candidates proudly declaring themselves independent of political parties, these faces in the background suggest the ways in which personal relationships with other prominent leaders serve in many cases as a replacement for both parties and platforms.

Both new candidates and incumbents are also attempting to respond to the perception that the Wolesi Jirga has done little for local communities. As one voter complained, "They are promising things that even the president is not able to do, such as reconstruction projects or the distribution of land." Instead, in both their slogans and speeches, many candidates are initially focusing on the fact that the main duty of the Wolesi Jirga is to pass laws, and are downplaying promises of resources. This is particularly true of a younger brand of candidate, found primarily in more urban provinces like Balkh and Kabul.

Learning from previous campaigns can also have its drawbacks. In light of fraud in the 2009 elections and minimal reforms by the IEC, it seems likely that fraud will actually increase as successful techniques are spread among the numerous candidates. As an example of the public nature of information about fraud, it is possible on YouTube to view video clips of brokers stuffing ballot boxes during the 2009 elections. Other techniques are newer. For example, responding to complaints by candidates after the 2009 elections that political brokers did not always deliver the votes they had promised,[4] candidates in one province in southern Afghanistan are now drawing up contract letters, paying brokers half of the money for votes upfront and leaving the other half in escrow with merchants in the bazaar, who withhold payment until after the election when it can be verified from local polling station tallies whether the desired votes were delivered.

4 In recent elections in Afghanistan, political brokers, oftentimes local elders or other leaders, have commonly attempted to negotiate for resources for their community or for themselves, in exchange for delivering blocs of votes. For more, see Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, "Voting Together—Why Afghanistan's 2009 Elections were (and were not) a Disaster" (Kabul: AREU, 2009).

4. More than Just Winning and Losing

The 2010 parliamentary election is not simply about winning and losing; it is also about public displays of power and the ability to mobilise groups politically. There has been a tendency for candidates, even those who seem destined to win with ease, to work to demonstrate their influence. In one Turkmen-dominated rural district of Balkh, the Turkmen candidate, who the community supports almost unanimously, seems highly likely to win. At the same time, he is actively campaigning in areas even where public support seems secure. This appears to be necessary, since the candidate is seen by most not simply as a parliamentarian, but also as the primary leader of the Turkmen in Afghanistan. Given such a lofty position, it is necessary to have local communities overwhelmed with posters of the leader; not to do so might suggest that he is not the dominant leader that most claimed. To maintain the status quo, it is important for his campaign to be at least as active as all the others in the area.

On the other end of the spectrum—particularly in a province like Kabul, with over 600 candidates and the ratio of candidates to available seats at almost 20 to 1—there are certain candidates with limited campaigns who seem destined to fail. Voters, however, usually explain this by claiming these candidates are simply trying to "increase their name" for future political or economic reasons. Generally, there is a sense that being a failed parliamentary candidate will lead to other opportunities, with one voter suggesting it might even be easier to seek asylum in the West after a failed campaign, when the candidate could claim he or she was being persecuted by political rivals.

Finally, on a wider level, the success of certain ethnic groups and tribes in electing MPs, but also in simply mobilising voters, will help establish them politically within their areas.[5] Many respondents commented on the ability or failure of communities to limit the number of candidates; this was seen as a demonstration of a group's political power. This is more the case in provinces like Balkh, where the political balance between ethnic groups and ethnic-based political parties is more tenuous.

5 For more on this, see Coburn and Larson, "Voting Together."

5. Campaigns and Competing Forms of Authority

The 2010 campaigns are not simply about a series of individuals competing for political office; they also actively demonstrate the way in which different modes of authority in Afghanistan are in competition with each other. There are several key categories among the candidates, such as former jihadi commanders, young and educated urban dwellers, religious leaders and those who derive their power from tribal bases. Since many voters have strong opinions (both positive and negative) about former jihadi commanders or younger candidates who many feel have turned away from tradition in Afghanistan, candidates are acutely aware of how they portrayed themselves, and more particularly, the type of candidate they claimed to be. Some are intentionally attempting to appeal to one main type, such as a young unshaven candidate in Balkh whose symbol is a laptop and is clearly aiming his campaign at younger voters who have become disenchanted with a political system they view as dominated by commanders associated with ethnic-based political parties. At the same time, several candidates are actively trying to bridge the gap between these modes of authority. Some candidates in Kabul have two photos on their campaign posters—one of the candidate in a Western suit and the other in more traditional dress. This is a way of suggesting to voters that a candidate is one of the people, wearing traditional garb, but that he or she also has the education and skills necessary to work effectively within the government bureaucracy.

Similarly, several candidates aim at mobilising multiple types of voters.[6] One candidate, whose slogan is "Civilisation with the guidance of the Quran within the framework of the Constitution," explained his choice by saying, "I have shot three groups together with one arrow: civilisation is addressing city people, the Quran is addressing religious and conservative people, and the Constitution is addressing bureaucrats, administrators and educated people." Campaigners are using different techniques to reach out to different groups, and one campaign head explained that it was important for the campaign to employ a mullah who could make good speeches, but also influential landowners who could mobilise their followers.

6 Others clearly did not. In several cases, tribal leaders in the south felt that simply mobilising those in their tribe would be sufficient to secure election, and that attempting to attract those from other tribes was too difficult.

6. It is Difficult to Uproot the Powerful

While voters were widely critical of the work that incumbent MPs have done over the past five years, new contestants are facing serious challenges trying to uproot these figures. Most importantly, incumbents have already campaigned before, and while campaigns have changed in some important ways, they know how to work the system, mobilising voters through legal or illegal means. Most respondents felt that the IEC had made no real changes to address issues of fraud and corruption, and that this would favour those who had been successful within the system once before. Furthermore, many respondents admitted that sitting parliamentarians, while ineffective, were known entities who were often considered safer than some of the unknown alternatives. Incumbents in several areas expressed their confidence in victory by allowing new candidates to spend two months getting their campaigns started, before, in the final month of campaigning, overshadowing these oftentimes poorer and less connected opponents, whose budgets had already been stretched, with organised campaigning blitzes.

Despite what appears to be a general lack of change within the Wolesi Jirga, there are several ways that new candidates may come to power, by often emphasising the failure of incumbent MPs to deliver on their promises. In particular, MPs are most at risk of losing their positions when their support comes from smaller, more coherent communities or ethnic groups that appear likely to collectively shift their support from an incumbent to a new candidate. This is likely the case in a rural district in Balkh Province, where many complained that their current MP was constantly in the city and never visited them. In this area, there was a surprising consensus that he should be replaced by a new candidate. Instead of dividing votes among the other new candidates in the district, most seemed settled upon one figure as a replacement of the current MP. Another group of new candidates who appear likely to win are a group of influential commanders who chose not to run in 2005, either because they saw little benefit in the Wolesi Jirga or because they feared that too much publicity might lead to persecution for past crimes. With many seeing the clear financial benefits of securing a seat and feeling reassured by a continued culture of impunity, several of these figures have decided to run in 2010, making it likely that former commanders will be even better represented in the next parliament.

Finally, among young voters there is significant enthusiasm for younger candidates who are educated and urban. These candidates often work to portray themselves as modern and capable of crossing ethnic and tribal lines. This tactic, however, appears unlikely to succeed outside of a handful of cases in major urban centres. In a context where political bloc voting along ethnic and community lines continues to be the cornerstone of the political system, campaigns that attempt to mobilise individuals as opposed to blocs will succeed in few cases.

7. What This Means for the International Presence in Afghanistan

Too often, elections in Afghanistan are viewed through the narrow prism of counterinsurgency, state-building and, occasionally, human rights agendas. Instead, the issues above suggest that while problems like insecurity and fraud are important to voters, the solutions are often not as simple as providing more soldiers to protect polling stations where well-trained officials count ballots under the watchful eye of impartial observers. This paper has posited that violence can be a tool used by innovative candidates in elections that are not simply about winning and losing. Fraud and corruption are only the symptoms of the real issue—that politics in Afghanistan, despite (and in some ways because of) nine years of international intervention, are inherently unstable. Violence is viewed as an effective political tool; the country is deeply divided on the question of whether it should be ruled by religious leaders, former commanders or bureaucrats; and there is a deep sense that the current political elite, who most Afghans feel are corrupt and unsympathetic to community needs, are so firmly entrenched that it is impossible to remove them from power.

The 2010 election in Afghanistan are likely to be deeply flawed, marred by fraud and, perhaps, violence. Members of the international community who have been disappointed by these faltering steps on what many hoped would be the path toward democracy should not be asking what procedures might address these election flaws. Rather, the question should be: How can a more transparent, accountable and impartial political culture be encouraged in Afghanistan? Elections by themselves will not necessarily bring stability, or even representative governance, to Afghanistan. Instead, the Afghan government and international organisations need to take the challenges of the 2010 election as an opportunity to start serious conversations about how corruption and impunity are creating instability, as well as how access to political and economic power can be more equitably distributed across Afghanistan.

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