PATRONAGE, POSTURING, DUTY, DEMOGRAPHICS

Why Afghans Voted in 2009

AREU Post-elections Brief
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1. Introduction[1]

Despite a recent rise in insurgent attacks in Kabul, on 20 August 2009 voters from urban and rural areas around the Afghan capital went to the polls to participate in presidential and provincial council elections. In the days leading up to the polls, the international media predicted that turnout would be low, with threats from the Taliban and a general disillusionment with the democratic process expected to keep voters at home.[2] Despite these concerns and six attacks on polling stations in the capital by midday, these expectations in certain areas proved exaggerated, with voters in some parts of the province waiting in long lines and enthusiastically displaying their newly dyed fingers after exiting the polling stations. International media then interpreted these scenes as voters "defying the Taliban," but AREU research suggests that there were other, more complex reasons for public participation in Kabul, which will have consequences over the coming year.

Taliban operations have been limited in the majority of Kabul province, and have had little effect on the day-to-day life of civilians. In fact, over the course of one month of research in three districts[3] in the province leading up to the elections, an AREU team found that the insurgency was rarely mentioned, and not one of the 100 plus interviewees included defying the Taliban as their chief reason for voting. Simultaneously, while many voters expressed their frustration with the Karzai regime and were resigned to the fact that he would probably win another term, most still went to the polls.

What then explains the levels of both participation and enthusiasm during the elections in these areas? Although some voters were motivated by a sense of national duty, and a desire to take part in the democratic process, the majority voted for a variety of other, overlapping reasons. This paper argues that to understand voting attitudes in Kabul Province it is necessary to also look at social pressure, material incentives, a desire to demonstrate community strength, and a desire to "back the winning horse."

In addition, while these were both provincial and national elections, it was clear that the political landscape of each local area was key in shaping patterns of voter participation and perception. The role and public perceptions of local "political brokers"[4]—those individuals who bargain with candidates on their ability to deliver bloc votes—was key, but was different and contested in each area. Brokers included traditional elders, but also former warlords and in some cases young, urban men working for certain candidates. This variety in itself says much about the way that many Afghans are debating and struggling with the process of creating a transparent and accountable democracy.

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2   See for example Caroline Wyatt, "Britain's part in election run-up," *BBC*, 19 August 2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/8208543.stm; Ed Johnson, "Afghan security threatens loom over election, UN says," *Bloomberg*, 19 August 2009, http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601091&sid=a0QOamd1R8Co; and Peter Graff, "UN says violence threatens Afghan Polls," *Reuters*, 19 August 2009, http://www.reuters.com/article/featuredCrisis/idUSN09399479.

3   Istalif, Qara Bagh and Dasht-i Barchi. Istalif is a small, predominantly Tajik district, northwest of Kabul. To the East, Qara Bagh is composed of both Tajik and Pashtun villages. Both have economic and social ties with Kabul, but are primarily rural with local politics still dominated by community leaders. Dasht-i Barchi is a primarily Hazara suburb of Kabul city with a population over one million, but is not a district in its own right. It serves as a relocation point for many returnees from Iran and also for those displaced from different parts of the Hazarajat. The areas were selected for their differences in ethnic composition, economic structures and, particularly, political landscape, something that will be explored more fully in a forthcoming AREU report (scheduled for October 09). Data was collected through over 100 interviews and focus group discussions with voters, candidates, campaign workers and local officials, over July and August 2009, with a team of six researchers interviewing and observing at over 25 polling stations in the study areas on election day.

4   For a comprehensive analysis of the role of political brokers in the run-up to elections, see Martine Van Bijlert, "How to Win an Afghan Election" (Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2009). This post-elections brief focuses on the way in which the actions and activities of these brokers, among other figures, affected the reasons why people voted on polling day.

This brief provides a preliminary glimpse into some of the motivations that drove participation during the election on 20 August. It suggests that in general, reasons for voting (and not voting) are diverse, and display a spectrum of individual, community-based and national concerns, which are often highly localised. It lays the groundwork for an in-depth AREU analysis of voter behaviour in the three districts, which will be available in October 2009.

2. A Different Narrative: Reasons for Voter Participation

2.1 Civic and religious duty

The concept of civic duty is one of the most discussed motivations bringing people to the polls. The media and public information campaigns often focused on the concept of *wasefah-e mili* or "national duty" in encouraging participation in the elections. Particularly among young, urban voters in Dasht-i Barchi, this seems to be an important motivation. Voters often pointed to the fact that this was one of the first times that they were able to help determine the direction of their country's future. In particular, they contrasted the democratic elections with politics during the civil war and under the Taliban regime. As a young male respondent from Dasht-i Barchi described, "We voted because we were so far behind other countries, we have to run forward. We want to show the international community that we are not only good at fighting and war, but we can also develop and improve our country." This sentiment, however, was not universal and among older, more rural voters, democracy was condemned as embracing western values and moving away from tradition, reflecting more widespread concerns with the meaning of democracy in Afghanistan.[5]

Largely absent from election coverage in the international press was the importance of Islam in bringing people to the polls. Mullahs and other religious figures played an important role in encouraging participation. The district mullah spoke at a district council meeting in Qara Bagh a few days before the election, describing how it was everyone's religious duty as a Muslim to select their leader.[6] Other respondents described how voters should select a candidate who was a "good" Muslim (they often used the word *neek,* which translates simply as "good" but has strong religious connotations) or had a good understanding of Islam. As one voter described, "We vote for a candidate who is first a Muslim, second an Afghan and finally, someone who can serve his people." Others, in response to pressure to vote for a certain candidate, pointed to the fact that the only people in the voting booth were the voter and Allah. This religious rhetoric was often mixed with the idea of national duty—one older male voter from Dasht-i Barchi told the research team that "we should vote, as it is our obligation and responsibility, just like it is our responsibility to pray." This amalgamation of national and religious duty is unsurprising considering the tendency in Afghanistan for religious and national identity to merge.[7]

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5   For more on this subject, see Anna Larson's forthcoming "Toward an Afghan Democracy? Exploring ownership of democratisation in Afghanistan" (Kabul: AREU, 2009).

6   Observations from a *shura* meeting.

7   See for example Thomas Barfield, "An Islamic State is a State Run by Good Muslims: Religion as a Way of Life and Not an Ideology in Afghanistan," in *Remaking Muslim Politics: Pluralism, Contestation, Democratization*, ed. Robert Hefner (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

2.2   Social pressure

In all three areas, voting at some stations became very much a town event, with local elders sitting outside of the polling stations drinking tea and chatting with voters as they came and went. In several instances candidates, commanders and government officials also lingered outside of stations, appearing to watch those that had voted. In the more rural areas, younger men often greeted the elders on their way into the polling station, making sure that they been seen voting. In some cases, voters from more rural areas actually travelled into the district centre to vote at the larger polling stations, demonstrating to those waiting outside the station that their village was taking an active part in the elections. In the reverse direction, many families from Qara Bagh and Istalif that live in Kabul drove back to their family homes, even though they could have voted in Kabul city. Elsewhere candidates, political brokers and local officials travelled between polling stations, encouraging groups to vote. For the most part these political figures did not overtly campaign for certain candidates on election day itself, though there was some discussion of particular individuals. At one station, one of the local commanders repeatedly told voters, "Today is an important day for the Doctor," referring to one of the local provincial council candidates.

Closer to the city in Dasht-i Barchi it was significantly more difficult for political brokers to keep track of who had voted and who had not, but there was still pressure to participate. Particularly among younger voters interviewed in Dasht-i Barchi, voting was a point of pride with young men,[8] who pressured each other to vote. This was helped by the system of inking the fingers of those that had voted, making it easy to spot those that had not. Older men in Dasht-i Barchi, who had congregated outside polling stations, were heard chastising younger members of the community who did not have ink on their fingers, stating that it was their duty to vote.

2.3   Material incentives

In some instances political brokers combined social pressure with material incentives in order to encourage voters to participate and vote for a specific candidate. Although AREU researchers found no direct evidence of money or goods exchanging hands for votes on election day, there were rumours of this happening in several areas. For example, *maliks* were said to have received cash for collecting certain numbers of voting cards, particularly in rural areas. One young man pointed to an elder who had recently purchased a new car as evidence of corruption. Less covertly, presidential campaigns often hosted programmes at which large meals were served in order to attract large crowds. This technique was used so frequently, however, that voters in all three areas joked about taking food from multiple candidates on the same day. Some declared openly at these events that they would accept the food of a candidate, but that this would not shape the way they voted. Several voters stated that in this election they were taking advantage of the candidates and political parties, while in the past it had been the parties taking advantage of them. This signals a greater public familiarity with the electoral system, and with the ways and means through which candidates attempt to gain votes.

On election day itself candidates and campaign workers in Qara Bagh hired taxis to drive to more remote villages and transport voters into the centre. Drivers were paid in gas to particularly target female voters who were less likely to walk longer distances to polling stations. One of these taxi drivers said that he had been told not to tell the voters

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8   While women were also interviewed for this study, the research team was not able to gather as wide a spectrum of female opinions as male. On election day women did not linger outside polling stations in the same way as men did, due to a range of factors including cultural norms, perceptions of security and household responsibilities.

directly to vote for a certain candidate, but was instructed to praise a specific candidate during the drive to the polling station. Material incentives like these, however, seemed to be rather ineffective at delivering votes or loyalty. Even providing salaries to campaign workers did not guarantee loyalty—one campaign worker in Qara Bagh who had worked on Karzai's campaign said that he hoped Karzai would not win in the first round so that he would have a job until the second round of voting in October. Voters also frequently employed a strategy of simultaneously courting more than one candidate. Outside one polling station a group of elders loudly professed their loyalty to a candidate who stopped by at the station, only to profess their loyalty for a different candidate a few minutes later once the first one had left. By appearing to support numerous candidates, though not acknowledging this to the candidates themselves, these community leaders increased the potential patronage gains that they could extract in the future. Instead of committing to one candidate and hoping they won, they were multiplying the number of potential victors who they could later approach to try to elicit resources.

2.4 A desire to demonstrate community strength

In Qara Bagh researchers repeatedly noted the district governor and other elders encouraging people to vote because it would demonstrate the strength of Qara Bagh in the region, as compared to other districts. One voter expressed this point clearly, stating that, "It is important to vote for two main reasons: First, because we are selecting our country's destiny by electing a president and representatives, and second, we want our district to have the highest number of votes of all the districts in Kabul." This appears to be particularly important in the absence of a valid census—indeed, local authorities seem to be trying to substitute the functions of a census with a high voter turnout, to prove the size of the population relative to other districts and the corresponding need for more services to be provided to the region. High turnout was not just proof for the government that certain districts were stronger than others. The head of the district *shura* in Qara Bagh pointed out in a district meeting that a high turnout could help the community solicit more aid from international NGOs as well.

Dasht-i Barchi, being a suburb of Kabul city rather than a district in its own right, does not have such defined boundaries as Istalif or Qara Bagh, creating a very different political landscape. Discussion among respondents about voting in order to demonstrate the strength and size of the Hazara community was common, but the "community" was often the Hazara ethnicity as a whole rather than the residents of Dasht-i Barchi specifically. Respondents related how on Fridays before election day *mullahs* had encouraged people to vote in order to show the government that they were a force to be reckoned with: that their sizeable minority should be considered a valuable, and so rewardable, voting bloc. The discourse of Hazara solidarity seems to overlap (both in Afghan and international accounts) with that of the Shia religious group, and it is possible that the *mullahs* were referring to both the potential political influence of Shia Muslims (who tend to be Hazara in Afghanistan), and that of Hazaras (who are mostly Shia) in particular. Nevertheless, it highlights the tendency in Dasht-i Barchi (as elsewhere) for religious leaders to be key political mobilisers of Hazaras as a perceived ethnic voting bloc.

Despite this, people in Dasht-i Barchi were also increasingly concerned with more localised interests, as demonstrated in the provincial council elections—which were overshadowed in international coverage by the presidential race. Many residents talked about the need to vote to gain a provincial council representative from their immediate residential area. Three reasons were given for this: first, that they would have easy access to their representative; second, that their representative would bring goods

and services to their current place of residence,[9] and third, that they had developed a familiarity or *ashnai* with a candidate due to living in close proximity to them.[10] It seems then that along with the need to demonstrate ethnic solidarity among Hazaras, there was also a concern to express and address the interests of much more local groupings by going to the polls.

2.5 Backing the winning horse

The tendency for voters to "back the winning horse" in Afghanistan has been noted in other studies[11] and research for this paper indicates that the opportunity to show support for the candidate expected to win is in itself a reason for voting. This is not simply a case of exchanging votes for material incentives, since it is in reality a way of expressing loyalty in the hope that this will lead to future favour and potentially patronage gains. Voters in all three areas studied noted that if a region supported the winning candidate, they could later send elders to Kabul and negotiate a larger portion of government spending because they had supported the candidate in the election.

The extent to which post-election patronage was expected went beyond local considerations, however, as one respondent explained: "We voted for Karzai because Mohaqqeq and Khalili have already signed an agreement with Karzai that he will do something for us, like solving land conflicts in Behsud, and making Jaghori its own province." While these issues are evidently specific to the Hazara population, the tendency for ethnic or regional leaders to bargain with presidential candidates for services with the promise of their particular voting bloc is common across all groups. These "services" include the promise of land, public works projects, control of government ministries and provincial governorships. The prospect of receiving these benefits then becomes in itself a reason to vote, which links the desire to back the winning candidate with that of receiving material incentives.

In Istalif voters faced a particular dilemma, since as Tajiks and supporters of deceased Northern Alliance leader Massoud many voters favored Abdullah, his close associate. The general sense early in the campaign, however, was that Abdullah had little chance to win. Thus, a vote for Abdullah would be wasted and elders encouraged younger voters to vote for Karzai in the hope that votes could later be translated into government services. As the race tightened in later weeks, fewer Istalifis were heard campaigning for Karzai, but some elders in town continued to emphasise the need to support him.

Interestingly this also appeared to happen in provincial council elections, with reports of elders and other influential figures having made it very clear to candidates at the polling stations that they voted for them, in order to reap rewards at a later stage. This show of support appears to have taken place whether or not votes were actually cast in favour of the candidates in question. This illustrates the fluidity of voter support for candidates, but also an emphasis on individual gain during the elections and the extent to which (especially influential) individuals can use the system to their personal advantage.

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9   This is somewhat contradictory of many people's opinions that the provincial councils do not function as useful or service-providing institutions, but it was nevertheless a stated expectation of a number of respondents.

10   For more on the significance of *ashnai,* see Anna Larson's forthcoming "Toward an Afghan Democracy."

11   For example Martine Van Bijlert, "How to win an Afghan Election."

3. Why Wasn't Participation Higher?

While participation was relatively high in the districts studied,[12] considering some of the circumstances, there were several key factors that prevented more voters from casting valid ballots on election day, particularly confusion surrounding the voting process and social norms. Although the media focused on security concerns in the leadup to the elections only a few voters in the study areas reported security as a significant factor in their decision to vote or not. In general, security around the polling centres observed was tight with Afghan National Army, Afghan National Police and plain-clothed National Directorate of Security officers searching voters, confiscating weapons and ensuring that lines remained orderly. Reports of several small attacks around Kabul on the morning of election day did not seem to significantly decrease the flow of voters to the polling stations during the day.

Confusion during the registration process and on election day did prevent many from voting or threatened to make their votes invalid. The chief complaints were from would-be voters who lost their voting cards (and thus were not allowed to vote), and from voters frustrated by the 524 candidates on the multiple page provincial council ballot. These concerns were also given as reasons for not participating by respondents interviewed in the run-up to the vote.

Prior to the elections there was also widespread concern about the low number of female voters who would participate, and in many places these concerns were substantiated on polling day. At some polling stations in Qara Bagh and Istalif, it was difficult for the research team to even locate the female section of the main polling stations in the districts, let alone discern the number of women participating. In stations where the women's lines were visible, very few appeared to be participating. This is unsurprising in these areas, given their generally conservative social norms. This contrasted strongly with Dasht-i Barchi, where women and men appeared to be voting in equal numbers.

4. Conclusions and Consequences

This paper has demonstrated that people's motivations for voting in Kabul province were various, encompassing a spectrum of highly individual, community-based, ethnic and national concerns. But what does this mean for the immediate post-election period and for Wolesi Jirga (parliamentary) elections in 2010? AREU's forthcoming discussion paper on this subject will address this in more detail, but initial findings are as follows:

For the immediate post-election period:

- Deals made between candidates and high-level political brokers (such as ethnic leaders) included extravagant promises (ranging from the paving of village streets to the creation of separate provinces, ministries and governorships for certain ethnicities), which, if not delivered, could instigate a number of reactions, ranging from further delegitimisation of the government to ethnic conflict.

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12   This assertion is made on the grounds of AREU researchers spending the day in each area, as statistics from the Independent Elections Commission (IEC) concerning district participation were not available at the time of writing. Nationwide turnout was initially estimated at 40-50 percent by the Commission, according to one BBC report: "Afghan rivals claim poll victory," *BBC*, 21 August 2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8213374.stm. However, conflicting figures are now being cited both by the IEC and different sources, with no real consensus as yet on the actual national turnout figures.

- The success of the elections will be judged by many voters on more than whether their candidate was successful or not, due to the fact that there were *multiple reasons to vote* and they did not all depend on a certain candidate winning. This renders the majority of voter support fluid, and in any post-election violence or conflict or in a second round, voters should not be assumed to remain loyal to the candidate they voted for.

For forthcoming Wolesi Jirga (WJ) elections:

- Participation in elections does not necessary mean a wholehearted endorsement of democracy or democratisation in Afghanistan. It cannot be assumed that the country has "democratised" just on the basis of public participation in elections. However, this study also notes the enthusiasm of many people in the districts studied to take part in elections, for many different reasons.

- To be successful WJ candidates will need to have a diverse, flexible campaign appealing to voters with very different, and at times not obvious, motives.

- It is likely that voters will choose WJ candidates on the basis of highly localised concerns. It is also possible that communities will further attempt to strategise collectively so as to elect a candidate with whom they are familiar, although the success of these strategies will vary.

- Political mobilisers will not all appear the same. In many situations *mullahs* and other religious leaders are likely to be key figures, but at the same time it is clear that a range of actors, from traditional leaders to politically active youth, are important drivers of voter participation.

- If candidates in this election are perceived to have won on the basis of having offered the most material incentives there will be further skepticism toward the electoral process as it continues through 2010. There will be more strategies by brokers aimed at maximising material gain and patronage rewards from candidates. Also, if promises made in 2009 are not delivered, further disillusionment with the government could lead to minimal participation in 2010.