



AFGHANISTAN:

Elections in Afghanistan:
The First Democratic
Transition

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BY

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PERSPECTIVES AND STRATEGIES
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ELECTIONS IN AFGHANISTAN: THE FIRST DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

Afghanistan is undergoing a democratic change in regime for the first time in its history. This is one of the three pivotal transitions since the Taliban rule was dismantled in 2001, the other two being security and economic transitions which are ongoing. The political transition is considered the most significant, and regarded by the domestic and international communities as the foundation of Afghanistan's transition and transformation processes. The credibility of the presidential elections coupled with the provincial ballot is what is under the scanner. Counting of the first round of voting shows that, as expected, none of the eight presidential candidates left in the fray managed to secure the 50 per cent plus vote required in the first round, though former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, as in the last election, is likely to come closest to it. The other two frontrunners are former Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani Ahmedzai and former Foreign Minister Zalmay Rasoul. The second run-off ballot will be held on 28 May and the results could take a couple of months to firm up. Hanging in the balance is the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA), which all the presidential candidates pledged to sign before the elections. So unless there is a dramatic shift of events, it is no longer a question of whether, but when the BSA will be signed. This is anticipated at the very latest by September 2014.

The elections have demonstrated the Afghan resolve to defy not just the elements, but also the armed opposition, notably the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network. Nearly 60 per cent of the 12 million electorate including 35 per cent of the female population cast their ballot. Afghans did not vote along ethnic lines but as Afghans opposed to the Taliban. This is a positive step towards Afghan nationhood. There are conflicting accounts of the security environment but it appears 350,000 personnel from the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), backed by 35,000 from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), were able to deter the Taliban on election day. One version claims some 700 attempted, though ineffective, strikes by the Taliban on the day of the ballot. Another account describes – that in the run up to elections, for almost two months – 39 suicide attacks launched across the 34 provinces. The litmus test of any assessment of the quality of security is to look at Kandahar, the cradle and nursery of the Taliban, where there were no attacks, and where 86 per cent of the Kandaharis voted in this election. In 2009, Kandahar was targeted as many as 30 times by the Taliban. Interior Minister Omar Daudzai said that the Taliban had planned over 140 attacks during the current elections in Afghanistan. This round of elections is a clear victory for democracy and the people of Afghanistan who made it possible against all odds.

This is the new Afghanistan – eight million children at school, two fifths of them girls, compared with one million under the Taliban rule, a tenfold increase in access to basic healthcare, some 20 million who now own mobile phones and hundreds of television channels, radio stations and newspapers, all defiantly independent. A country check must also include the 50,000 students at Kabul University.

As for credibility of the elections, it would seem elections in Afghanistan easily crossed the international benchmark of being better than the 2009 elections, which were marred by widespread rigging and fraud. With the second round of voting awaited, it is too early to take a call on this, but some figures from the first round of voting reflect a significant improvement over the last elections. The Independent Election Commission (IEC) and the Independent Election Complaints Commission have reported several cases of electoral irregularities, including 200 of the 6,000 polling stations failing to open in the more sensitive areas. The number of booths not opening is contested and is allegedly on the

higher side. A common complaint in some parts was of ballot papers running out due to the unexpected larger turnout than widely expected. This deficiency was made good in the affected places. The number of foreign observers, mainly restricted to Kabul, was less than in 2009. The suicide attack at Serena Hotel, days before polling, ensured that just a handful of Kabul based foreign observers could monitor these elections. The Independent Election Complaints Commission is known to have received around 1,500 complaints. The IEC was rapped by European Union (EU) representatives over banning sending text messages. Another critical aspect of the election will be the transparency of vote counting which so far has been complaint free.

According to The Economist, civil society organisations deployed members in areas that had previously shown irregularities, while many journalists risked their own safety in the hunt for ballot rigging. Afghanistan's intelligence agency, the National Directorate of Security apparently set up its own electoral complaints hotline.

EUROPEAN UNION AND INTERNATIONALLY LAID DOWN BENCHMARKS

Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) was to provide 15 election observers, following the visit of an EU task force, to assess the election environment in January 2014, much delayed due to concerns of security. In January 2014, the Council of the European Union agreed that:

- The Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework (TMAF) between Afghanistan and the international community, signed at the Tokyo Conference in 2012, was to be the bedrock of its relations;
- Afghanistan had to finalise negotiations on the Cooperation Agreement in Partnership and Development (CAPD) which includes the BSA.
- An Afghan-led and Afghan-owned electoral process had to be inclusive, transparent and credible, leading to legitimate outcomes. Kabul was to provide a comprehensive security plan and fraud prevention measures, like avoidance of multiple voting, in particular men voting on behalf of women, ensuring security of ballot boxes and prevention of electoral fraud. The EU and the United Nations were to provide technical support for free and fair conduct of elections. Afghanistan did provide the comprehensive security plan including measures for a fraud free election.

A detailed report is to be sent by Kabul to Brussels on how various electoral benchmarks were met on the ground to ascertain credibility of the election process. The TMAF establishes a variety of benchmarks on a host of issues like governance, combating corruption, human rights, violence against women, legal and judicial reform, policing, justice and rule of the law. The alarming increase in opium/poppy cultivation was flagged, as also the need for establishing a credible peace process which respects the constitution and women's rights.

The Council decisions emphasise "regionally driven initiatives aimed at deepening political and economic cooperation between Afghanistan and its neighbours through the Heart of Asia initiative." It also stresses a Regional Solution Strategy for Reintegration of Afghan Refugees in Iran and Pakistan. On its longer term role and commitment, the EU has directed its High Representatives to evolve by June 2014, a strategy covering the period up to 2016 based on the TMAF and CAPD. So the window of opportunity for effective transition is contingent upon a responsible drawdown of foreign forces that enables sufficient capacity building and deterrence in the ANSF, and its staying power to ensure the gains of the last decade are suitably preserved.

ASSESSMENT OF THE ELECTION

Against this background, the initial assessment must be of very satisfactory elections which could have been better monitored but whose legitimacy is beyond doubt. Of the lessons from the electoral process in Afghanistan, two facts are clear:

Afghan society has changed substantially materially and emotionally. It is a success story of a vibrant and independent Afghanistan which has been rebuilt, especially Kabul from rubble, more than once. The trajectory of social and human indices are too well known. But just to recount – the Afghans have crossed the line of fear that the Taliban had posed for more than a decade.

Full marks to the ANSF who have withstood the challenge of the Taliban. Few had expected that Afghan soldiers, police and intelligence agencies would be able to provide a comprehensive election security plan but what is more, foil and deter Taliban attacks. This is a positive augury for the security transition in the works but has to be backed by international commitments to help sustain the training, equipment and salary bills of the ANSF. A North Atlantic Treaty Organization Salary Trust Fund is reportedly in the making. Retaining control of key communication centres – like Jalalabad, Kabul, Kandahar and Mazar e Sharif – and the road networks are essential to

keep the Taliban at bay. Afghan intelligence and special forces have to be on top to sanitise Kabul and de-Talibanise institutions infiltrated by them.

No one country controls the destiny of Afghanistan more than Pakistan does, and is frequently called the wild card in post 2014 outcomes in Afghanistan. The three frontrunners: Abdullah, Ghani and Rasoul are on record for opposing the Taliban and holding Pakistan responsible for ‘terrorism’ inside Afghanistan. The relatively peaceful conduct of elections is being attributed by some in no small measure to Pakistan: its closing down of the border, and most importantly, realisation that a stable and peaceful Afghanistan is not just good and necessary for Pakistan but the entire region also. Were this assumption to turn into a reality it would become a different ballgame in Afghanistan.

Some optimists and Afghan well-wishers in Pakistan interpret Islamabad congratulating Kabul for a successful election, its willingness to support anyone chosen by Afghanistan as their President and clear articulation of non-interference in neighbouring countries as cause for optimism. In the meantime, a peaceful and fraught-free second round of elections to choose the new President of Afghanistan – either Ghani or Abdullah – will be no mean achievement and herald the country’s entry into the decade of transformation.

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