

Afghan Presidential Elections: A mirror of self-deception

Judgement over the 20 August Afghan elections has varied widely among observers. The most critical has been the Free and Fair Election Foundation, which reported widespread fraud. The EU observers, by contrast, judged that the elections were 'free and fair' despite widespread violence. Most diplomats congratulated Afghanistan over a voter turnout estimated at 40-50%, which despite being well below the official 70% of 2004 is believed to be acceptable in the face of 'widespread' violence.



In reality, violence on election day was quite limited, with a total of 26 fatalities including insurgents and Afghan security forces; several civilian casualties were the result of long-distance rocket firing. It is obvious that the Taliban could have done much more (worse) had they been determined to disrupt the elections.

Instead, the Taliban leadership has largely confined itself to rhetorically hostile statements, probably considering that the elections did not represent a threat to its strategic and political interests. When diplomats and observers try to sell the elections as free and fair and as an achievement in the face of extremist violence, they have mainly in mind their home constituencies in Europe and America; the Afghan public had low expectations from the beginning since voter

registration cards were openly for sale in the bazaars and the registration of under-age voters was widespread, having been estimated at as much as 20% of the total. In some Pashtun-populated provinces expected to support Karzai, large scale proxy registration and voting on 'behalf' of women was observed. In many cases the police reportedly cooperated in organising the fraud. Although it will never be possible to tell with certainty, the fraud seems to have been on a scale comparable with Ahmadinejad's in Iran, a few months ago.

However, the main problem with Friday's elections is not that there was widespread fraud. In the context of an ongoing and worsening insurgency, which is beginning to look like a civil war, even the most committed statesman would probably have made recourse to fraud to secure stability and continuity over chaos. If Karzai cheated, his reasons are at least understandable. The problem is instead with the expectation, originally entertained by the Bush administration but then transmitted to its successor in Washington and to its European allies, that these elections would have improved the prospects of stabilising Afghanistan, by somehow legitimising a political system imported from abroad and demonstrating the rewards of competing for power peacefully. Such a belief may have been held only half-heartedly, but nonetheless during 2008 and 2009 it shaped the planning and the behaviour of the international coalition operating in Afghanistan.

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The post-elections controversy was briefly frozen as the candidates wait for the announcement of the Electoral Commission, but on Sunday main challenger Abdullah openly accused the Karzai camp of widespread fraud. Unless Abdullah backs down soon, it might well be that the idea of peaceful competition for power will end up completely discredited rather than strengthened. The unequivocal evidence of fraud offers the defeated candidates the perfect justification for their defeat in any case, whether their chances were genuine or not. The diatribe is not likely to lead to a civil war, but will discredit what is left to be discredited of the system.

Once Karzai's re-election is confirmed, he will find himself under strong pressure to mollify the opposition and make concessions in terms of power sharing. Some former opponents, including Ali Jalali who had been one of the opinion poll leaders, have already announced their support for Karzai and will likely be rewarded with appointments. Karzai appears intentioned to create a number of supra-ministerial positions, such security and reconstruction 'tsars' and possibly a prime-ministerial post, to the benefit of the highest profile challengers. However, he would retain the power to sack any of these as it suits him. As in the past, either the opposition will be fully co-opted into Karzai's patronage system, or any post-electoral honeymoon between Karzai and the reformers will soon be over. Once having sacrificed their credibility to

the 'political necessity' of making a deal with Karzai, the former opponents could easily be discarded and marginalised. For what polls are worth, Jalali has for example already lost almost all the public support which he had enjoyed until April, before he decided to drop from the race.

Karzai, moreover, will have to reward at least some of those who supported him during the campaign, a list which includes countless regional and local strongmen, politicians and state officials. The Taliban will be watching in amusement while Karzai tries to square the circle, trying to squeeze some value out of an exercise which from the perspective of winning the war in Afghanistan will probably be recognised one day as having been mostly counter-productive.

Last year, some observers and policy makers floated the possibility of not having the elections at all in 2009 and replacing them with a 'Loya Jirga', or assembly of community leaders. Karzai was apparently inclined towards such an option. 'Loya Jirgas' are easy to manipulate for incumbents, since in most cases determining who is a 'community leader' is a rather arbitrary decision. The legitimacy deriving from the Jirga would have been very modest, but might have still been greater than that derived from an obviously fraudulent electoral process. In reality, however, the Loya Jirga option never had much of a chance, because it would have been interpreted, abroad even more than in Afghanistan, as an admission of the defeat of the international coalition. There has been much talk, particularly in Washington and London, of adopting more realistic aims for international intervention in Afghanistan than creating a democratic and functional Afghan state. This, however, is easier said than done. A minimalist strategy, stripped of all 'ideological' aims, might now sound attractive in the West, but what will it have to offer to those Afghans supposed to be increasingly bearing the burden of fighting the Taliban? There would be little else left for them than a role of mercenaries in somebody's else war, and mercenaries do not have a strong record of winning wars.

