Elections and Conflict in Afghanistan

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- The 2009 presidential elections and 2010 parliamentary elections in Afghanistan saw a fall in the number of voters which points to growing public frustration and disillusionment with elections as a result of insecurity, systematic fraud, misuse of power and a lack of awareness about procedures.

- The challenges to institutionalising elections as a democratic procedure in Afghanistan are numerous. The most prominent are the security situation, a lack of mechanisms to encourage meaningful party participation, weak state institutions and a lack of universal impartiality within government authorities.

- The international community in the process has sent conflicting messages to the public about the independence and integrity of the process. Political influence from neighbouring countries and regional powers distorted elections results by providing support for specific candidates. Even international observer missions in Afghanistan are less effective in deterring fraud compared to other contexts because of security conditions.

- In addition, three major socio-economic challenges influence the success (or lack thereof) of election participation and institutionalisation in Afghanistan: illiteracy, poverty and women's unequal status in Afghan society.

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1. Summary

The 2009 presidential elections and the 2010 parliamentary elections in Afghanistan are the two most recent and also probably the most publicly discussed national democratic events in the country's history. The fall in the number of voters in both elections points to growing public frustration and disillusionment with the process as a result of insecurity, systematic fraud, misuse of power by government authorities and the warlords and lack of awareness about procedures. The claims of lack of impartiality on the part of stakeholders, including, but not limited to the Independent Elections Commission (IEC) and the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC), also contributed to public mistrust. However, despite the numerous shortcomings, the elections have led to public mobilisation and have come to be regarded as the only legitimate way to power for many.

The challenges to institutionalising elections as a democratic procedure in Afghanistan are numerous. The challenging security situation in parts of the country not only limits the activities of the IEC but also prevents large parts of the population from voting and thus distorts both national and local results. Lack of mechanisms to encourage meaningful party participation strengthens individual power bases based on intimidation and money and prevents the formation of a strong political front. Weak state institutions also influence the election process and results negatively. Lack of universal impartiality and professionalism on the part of the Afghan army and police, the Afghan judicial system and local government authorities create opportunities for manipulation and misuse and allow fraud to go unnoticed and unpunished. In the absence of security for voters and election workers and reliable and accountable state institutions, fair, acceptable and transparent elections seem like a distant dream in Afghanistan.

External influences also impact election procedures in Afghanistan. The chaotic and confusing role of the international community sends the public conflicting messages about the independence and integrity of the process. Political influence from neighbouring countries and regional powers distorts election results and provides unfair and unaccounted for political and financial support for specific candidates. Even international observer missions, which are one of the main deterrents to fraud in other elections, are less effective in the Afghan context where security limits their observation and movements.

In addition to political and specific procedural failures and shortcomings, there are socio-economic factors that influence the success (or failure) of the process in the Afghan context. Three major challenges to election participation and institutionalisation are illiteracy, poverty and women's unequal status in Afghan society. Widespread illiteracy, specifically among the older generation and women, prevents meaningful participation in the election process and a clear understanding of it. Poverty and increasing income gaps have led to the alienation of a large proportion of young people from government. Democracy, which was earlier anticipated by many in Afghanistan as a way of solving all problems, including unemployment and poverty, has in their eyes failed to deliver and is not a system worth investing in anymore. Lack of women's participation both as election workers and observers and as voters has been a huge challenge to the fairness and universality of elections in parts of the country. Particularly in the case of the parliamentary elections, women candidates also faced many challenges during the campaign in terms of both security and traditional authorities that condemned their participation, putting them in a less favourable position compared to their male counterparts.

While the 2009 presidential election was somewhat settled with the »re-election« of Hamid Karzai, the dispute over the results of the parliamentary elections is still going on (as of March 2011). Dissatisfied candidates have not only challenged the published results, but also the authority of the IEC and the ECC as election organisations. By taking the dispute to the Attorney General's Office, the losing candidates have managed to involve a large array of players. Overall, the dispute, which is not yet resolved, illustrates the central problem that there is no body with the authority and credibility to make the final call or to mediate.

Despite all the challenges, it is still too early to judge the elections a complete failure in the Afghan context. After all, ordinary Afghans are doing what they can to participate and »own« the process. We owe it to them to give elections another chance and perhaps to prepare better for upcoming elections.

2. Current Situation

In 2010, the second round of the parliamentary elections took place. Since 2004, the Afghan public has experienced two presidential elections, two rounds of provincial council elections and the first round of parliamentary elections. If the recent elections had taken place as hoped, this process-in-the-making could have been a very constructive step towards building bridges between the Afghan government and the public by giving the latter the right to determine their political leaders and enhance political participation. However, this was not the case. The main factors in fraud (which already in previous elections among other things enabled increasingly sophisticated skills to commit fraud) were widespread insecurity and weak and distrusted electoral institutions. This caused many people to stay at home due to growing frustration and disillusionment.

One consequence of fraud in previous elections is that the Afghan people have come to believe that only the most powerful and rich individuals have a real chance of winning. One major dilemma caused by insecurity in many places in the south and south east concerns whether to open a large number of polling centres on election day, which cannot be observed and thus are very prone to fraud, or to keep a considerable number of polling centres closed, reducing accessibility for voters and admitting that insecurity is widespread.

In 2010, in addition to the abovementioned challenges, disagreements between the president and the parliament on the election law led to growing mistrust of the process. Pushing through a new version of the election law prior to the parliamentary election, the president disregarded the parliament's demand for approval of the new law. However, although the MPs in the old parliament did not approve this version of the election law, they nominated themselves for the new parliament in accordance with that law.

One way of looking at election processes in Afghanistan is as stages and a practice for the Afghan public towards democratisation of the country. The fact is that the public did react to fraud by organising meetings and demonstrations: this shows that people are slowly familiarising themselves with the concept of living in a democratic country and exercising their democratic rights.

At the end of 2010, Afghanistan faced many challenges. The transition from international authority in the areas of security and governance, as well as reconciliation and reintegration with regard to the insurgency were set to be the buzz words of 2011 and beyond. The country remains politically extremely volatile, while NATO countries are looking for ways to decrease or withdraw their troops. In this situation, the interest in analysing these past elections more thoroughly and aiming for a true reform of electoral structures remains limited.

3. Contextual Analysis

3.1 Rules of the Game

Much has been written on the rapid political change Afghanistan underwent after the fall of the Taliban at the end of 2001. The Petersberg Agreement was not a peace agreement, but an emergency conference to define an ambitious road map for Afghanistan. Within two and a half years, the re-establishment of state institutions and the introduction of democracy was supposed to be completed. While there were delays, the major steps were realised and included the Emergency Loya Jirga, the establishment of an interim government under Hamid Karzai, and the Constitutional Loya Jirga in 2004, that passed the new constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and granted the president a wide range of powers with few checks and balances with regard to other institutions. The presidential elections on 9 October 2004 and the parliamentary elections on 18 September 2005 were seen as a »success« in terms of the nascent structures of the state and the novelty of the concept of democracy.

While up until 2005 the process was largely regarded as moving forward and there were hopes of establishing a new more democratic and just regime, the mood shifted in 2005/2006. The insurgency gained ground outside urban centres and the distrust between the Afghan government and international actors grew steadily, reaching yet another climax with widespread allegations of corruption within the government and the economic-political elite and a massive influx of foreign money fuelling the process. Warlords obtained powerful positions within the system, leaving little room for transitional justice and a wide spread reconciliation amongst the population.

3.1.1 Electoral system

The first electoral law was passed by parliament in 2005, but since 2008 there has been a general feeling that the law needs to be changed in order to reflect a growing degree of »Afghanisation«. Parliament is not allowed to do such a thing during the last year prior to parliamentary elections. In February 2010, the president by decree rewrote the law during a parliamentary break, which is permissible in an emergency. It was rejected by the lower house at the end of March 2010, then incorrectly passed to the upper house which, being pro-Karzai, accepted the law and passed it back to the government. In addition, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General, Steffan de Mistura, had negotiated concessions with Karzai on the first draft of the law.[1] The clearest changes in the first draft included the removal of all three foreign members from the Electoral Complains Commission (ECC, the body that investigates fraud), the limitation of the number of women in parliament and the introduction of stricter qualifications for those wishing to become candidates for office. The agreement with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, however, led to the compromise that the UN would nominate two of the commissioners on the ECC and that there be a minimum of 68 women in parliament (and not a maximum of 68).

What was kept was the much debated Single-Non-Transferable-Vote (SNTV) system. It generally leads to political parties playing a marginal role in elections and to a lack of strong blocs or alliances in parliament. Also, provinces as a whole are the constituencies in parliamentary elections: candidates find it very difficult to campaign throughout the constituency and large parts of the population later – especially in marginalised and insecure districts – have no link with or representation in parliament.

This lead to electoral violence, albeit still to a limited degree. In 2010, in the province of Ghazni, voting in the securer areas dominated by the Hazara population was highly organised. In the Pashtun-dominated areas, however, there was much intimidation and little voting. In consequence, all 11 seats allocated to the province were won by Hazara, with the Pashtun candidates demonstrating and the Pashtun population feeling even more politically marginalised.

Given this state of affairs, are elections still accepted as means of (re)distributing power? The argument has been made that after the highly controversial and fraud-infused presidential elections Karzai would be seen as illegitimate and his position would be weakened. This did not prove to be true: he remains a potent force. The distribution of power in Afghanistan is based partly on elections, partly on tradition, performance, financial influence and the myth of national liberation (which explains the success of many former Mujahedeen commanders). While the provincial council and parliamentary elections may not be perceived as fair and fuel the anger of some, they add to the resignation of most citizens, who do not feel they have a significant influence over the selection of their political leaders.

If there are changes in the distribution of power, it is not along political blocs or party lines, or for or against the government. The political base remains weak and the proportion of swing votes is high. Politics is a matter of individuals, and the general perception is that success goes to those able to mobilise, manipulate and wield political and financial influence.

3.1.2 Checks and Balances

Afghanistan has a strong presidential political system, which is seen as problematic by many both in and outside Afghanistan. Power is centralised in the capital, with too little authority in the provinces and districts. The legitimacy of state institutions is minimal; participatory elements are very weak. Due to insufficient demilitarisation, political structures are dominated by the power of the gun. Countrywide, basic services are not provided by the state. Corruption and involvement in the drug trade are rampant both in and outside government structures. International support for the political system is not sufficiently coordinated and in many areas it is not effective.[2]

Parliament consists of an upper house (Mesherano Jirga, made up of presidential and provincial appointees) and a lower house (Wolesi Jirga). It approves or rejects legislation proposed by the government, but its role in the political system is seen as marginal. How-

1. Citha D. Maaß/Thomas Ruttig: Afghanistans Parlementswahlen 2010: Verpasste Wahlrechtsreformen und politische Mänöver schwächen neues Parlament, SWP-Aktuell 66, September 2010.

2. Thomas Ruttig: Afghanistan: Institutionen ohne Demokratie – Strukturelle Schwächen des Staatsaufbaus und Ansätze für eine politische Stabilisierung, SWP, June 2008.

ever, it has increasingly shown its strength, for example by blocking the president's choice for certain cabinet posts in 2010.

3.1.3 Security Sector and judicial system

Some of the other state institutions that dealt directly with electoral processes and were able to enhance them in past Afghan elections were the Afghan army and Police, the judicial system and local government authorities. However, all these bodies are still recovering from many years of war and instability and are strongly affected by the general lack of accountability in the Afghan government.

The Afghan army and police were mainly responsible for ensuring the security of voters, election workers and observers before, during and after election day. Extensive efforts were made by the Ministry of the Interior to coordinate closely with different stakeholders and to broadcast reassuring messages to voters before election day. Security officials also tackled several small armed attacks in various parts of the country. However, there were complaints about police and army conduct during and before the elections. Allegations of fraud and bias on the part of the police and the army are yet to be investigated by observer organisations, but there was a sense of mistrust and fear that the police and army may not be entirely committed to the process and rather served particular candidates.

A well-functioning judicial system is essential for responding to complaints, dealing with violators and peacefully and legally solving electoral disagreements. The Afghan judicial system is slow, lacks transparency and is influenced by outside politics. The inability of the judicial system to resolve electoral conflicts and complaints creates opportunities to violate electoral laws and to use illegitimate and violent means to resolve electoral conflict. This is particularly visible with regard to the ongoing debate on the role of the General Attorney's Office in ruling on complaints arising from the 2010 elections (see below).

3.1.4 Traditional Authorities

When formal political structures fail, there is currently a trend to highlight the importance of informal governance structures, for example in the field of dispute re-

solution. A large body of literature has accumulated on the subject of traditional conflict resolution. However, the integrity of informal systems varies across Afghanistan and linking informal systems with state institutions faces significant logistical, cultural, political and legal challenges. These include the upholding of international human rights standards and the spoiling of the system due to the introduction of external funding.[3]

With regard to electoral practices, the influence of local elders is strong where traditional structures are still strong. For example, local elders determine which candidate is to be supported and the population of the village will act accordingly. However, this power of determining votes is increasingly linked to economic or military power.

The lessons learned from a brief analysis of the political setting highlight the importance of treating elections as a process linked to various other aspects of nation-building and good governance rather than as occasional events. Fair, acceptable and transparent elections are possible only in a context in which the security of voters and election workers is ensured and state institutions are reliable and accountable. Democratisation is regarded very critically by many Afghans today. The perception of elections plays a large part in this negative image of weak state institutions, in which fraud and corruption are rife.

3.2 Key Players and Their Interests

There are a range of key players involved in the election process, which include political figures and groups, the Independent Election Commission, the Electoral Complaints Commission, the Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA) and the media. All these players act on different levels, influencing the process and outcomes of elections significantly.

3.2.1 Political Leaders, Parties and Elites

Powerful political figures and groups played a major role in the recent parliamentary election as they have done in previous presidential and parliamentary elections.

3. Noah Coburn and John Dempsey: Informal Dispute Resolution in Afghanistan, United States Institute of Peace Special Report 247, August 2010.

Their role was empowered either by the government or their ethnic group. They used different tools to ensure their seat in the new parliament, and exploited ethnic and religious issues to push people to participate. Also, they actively worked to increase their membership in the Election Commission. In some cases members of the Election and Complaints Commissions were »bought out« by political figures and groups. The powerful political groups and individuals also affected the campaign process for other candidates with less power, money and support from the government, as they were not able to travel to unsafe remote areas to campaign and distribute their posters. Among these candidates were female candidates who had limited opportunities in terms of travelling to distant and remote areas to campaign.

Political parties do not play a significant role in elections, at least not at first sight. In the 2010 parliamentary elections, only 32 candidates indicated their affiliation with a political party, 1.2 per cent of the total number of candidates. Independent candidates have a better chance because many parties discredited themselves during the 30 years of conflict and because they can gain support in a more flexible manner and hence be open to involvement in different alliances.[4] In 2010, a new political party law was enacted which required the more than one hundred political parties to re-register. Due to technical problems, only five parties were registered with the Ministry of Justice when it was time to field candidates. Most importantly, however, the SNTV system prevents individuals from joining together around common goals, both today and in the near future. As one young observer put it, »See how many candidates we have in Kabul, over 600; it is not because we see a vivid process of democratisation, it is because no one trusts anyone.«

But to make matters even more complicated, the number of officially affiliated candidates does not reflect real ties to parties, especially to the military-political factions that have developed into parties and provided many candidates with support. The secrecy surrounding who was supported by whom did not add to the level of trust among the voters with regard to the party system. The National Democratic Institute estimates that 75 potential members of the Wolesi Jirga will be affiliated with

a political party, the largest parties represented in the new parliament being Hezb-e Jamiat Islami and Hezb-e Junbish Milli Islami.[5]

Much debated also is the question of the Taliban's election strategy. The Taliban officially condemned the elections as an exercise to justify what they call the foreign occupation of Afghanistan. In this light, everyone involved with the elections is a legitimate target. Stories of FEFA national observers being kidnapped or severely beaten by the Taliban on election day in insecure provinces such as Paktika are just one example. In general, however, the number of violent incidences on election days in 2009 and 2010 was lower than many had feared. Beyond the official message, some partly reconciled Taliban were also »(…) feeling their way into the political system, (…)«[6] by using elections to obtain a position within the system. They were often able to convey their message clearly with easy slogans such as »serving weak families and bringing back prisoners who are innocent«. Other candidates were forced to cut deals with the insurgents in order to obtain free passage in their constituency so that they could campaign at all.

Ethnicity continues to play a major role in organising political support. In the 2009 and 2010 elections Hazaras managed to organise their members of the community much better than other ethnic groups did. Pashtuns, many of whom live in the insecure parts of the country, were more marginalised with regard to the voting process, with the result that in ethnically mixed provinces fewer Pashtuns gained seats in parliament, giving rise to a sense of exclusion in this ethnic group.

3.2.2 Electoral Institutions

Independent Election Commission (IEC)

The Independent Election Commission organises elections in Afghanistan. Strong allegations were made concerning the lack of impartiality of the IEC in 2009 and this became a common and prevailing conception, especially after reports about »extensive« election fraud

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4. Babak Khalatbari: Parlamentswahlen in Afghanistan: Demokratie ohne Parteien?, Länderbericht Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 17 September 2010.

5. National Democratic Institute: Afghanistan Election Update, 30 October 2010.

6. A quote from former MP Daud Sultanzoy, cited in Thomas Ruttig: 2010 Elections 13: A Taliban Election Campaign? Blog on the Afghanistan Analysts Network. http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=1134.

by IEC staff were made public. The Afghan-led Commission was expected to create a sense of ownership of the process among Afghans; however, many Afghans did not trust the commissioners as completely impartial individuals because they are Afghans.

In 2010, the IEC invested much time and energy in responding to such allegations and defending its reputation in the period leading up to the elections, but it could not effectively respond to all demands since some of them were beyond the IEC's means and/or authority (ensuring security, registering emigrant Afghans for elections). At press conferences, its independence and transparency was repeated like a mantra. The Independent Elections Commission can act as an important body to effectively administer elections and is a great opportunity for Afghans themselves to master and own the process slowly, but in an unstable and difficult political environment, it may turn into a highly defensive, ineffective and manipulated organisation. The pressure on many IEC officials and involvement in reshuffling was clear and even documented (among the most prominent examples was the taped telephone conversation between Ismail Khan and an IEC employee concerning whom the former wanted in and out of the western part of Afghanistan).

Especially prior to the 2010 elections, the IEC gained a better reputation, with its new head Fazel Ahmad Manawi seen by many as a step towards transparency and accountability. After the election on 18 September 2010, the IEC again acted too opaquely and accusations of involvement in fraud and reshuffling were frequent. In Nangahar and Badahshan there were major anomalies in recording the results, leading to a recount. Importantly, Article 57 of the electoral law was interpreted by the IEC to mean that it has the power to invalidate and exclude votes from the counting process (1.3 million out of a total of 5.6 million). General reasons were given, for example an impossibly high number of votes per station, tampering with forms or closed stations which nevertheless reported results, but specifics were not – or only slowly – provided.

Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC)

The Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) played an important role until 2009, when three of the five commissioners were internationals. Grand Kippen, as the head of the ECC, played a strong role in 2009, which was regarded positively by many internationals, but critically by many Afghans, who, influenced by media coverage, saw it as »the West« running the show. In 2010, the Complaints Commission was perceived by many as incompetent as various powerful groups and individuals challenged the results. When candidates approached the Complaints Commission with their reports of fraud the Commission acted weakly. In 2010, only two international commissioners where appointed and played a rather minimal role. The ECC decentralised its functions to the provinces in 2010, so that there were 34 provincial ECCs who dealt with complaints very differently. There was also the perception of widespread nepotism in ECC hiring procedures (according to the law, it must be re-established at each election within a short period). After the elections, there was a lack of transparency when it came to information on the exclusion of individual candidates. Also, the ECC interpreted the law in a way that it is not authorized to hear complaints about IEC decisions.

Attorney General's Office

The weakness of the ECC and its failure to play a watch-dog role led to the involvement of yet another arbiter in the game: the Attorney General's Office, which was approached by many candidates who felt powerless and were encouraged to intervene by the president, who was dissatisfied with the results of the parliamentary elections. The Attorney General's Office hence started investigating IEC and ECC staff. The whole dispute, which is not yet over, illustrates the central problem that there is no body that has the authority and credibility to make the final call or to mediate.[7]

Behind the weakness of the IEC and the ECC stands the fact that these institutions were not built up systematically after the elections of 2004/05. There was a sudden panic on the part of international actors and Afghans to revive these bodies. But in a country in which education levels are very low and corruption widespread, this sort of institution-building cannot happen overnight. In Paktika, according to the provincial head of the Independent Electoral Commission, after the 2009 election, 1,555 personal were blacklisted due to allegations of fraud. Hence, hiring around 3,000 qualified and trustworthy electoral staff, in-

7. Martine van Bijlert: 2010 Elections 31: Who will fix the elections? Afghanistan Analysts Network, Blog posted on 6.11.2010.

cluding at least 10 per cent women, in the course of a few weeks in districts heavily affected by the insurgency is possibly the worst job one can imagine. Without a sustainable build up of the structural and technical capacities of the electoral institutions, trust in them will vanish completely.

3.2.3 Media

In previous Afghan elections, many allegations of fraud came through the media, which also acted as a bridge between the IEC and ordinary Afghans. The media thus had a very significant role in building and facilitating debate and in promoting accountability. The media in Afghanistan are politically fragmented, which became increasingly evident as the elections approached. »Independent« or »private« TV and radio stations (the most effective media in largely illiterate Afghanistan), but also newspapers and even blogs and websites all had particular agendas and candidates and the divisions were usually sharp and clear: at least, that is how they were perceived among ordinary Afghans. This created the risk of the media becoming an instrument for triggering electoral violence since there is a fine line between respecting freedom of speech and provoking anger and heightened sensitivities in a context such as Afghanistan.

One of the most important contributions of the media came during the campaign. The media was the main channel for raising awareness of the process and the candidates for people all over the country. The Afghan media should also be credited with initiating a culture of televised presidential debates. The initiative by Tolo TV on 23 July 2009,[8] followed by another debate on 16 August at which this time the incumbent was present, led to lively and frank debates among many Afghans. The debates were anticipated with excitement and created a healthy public discussion about the merits of the candidates and Afghanistan's political future.

3.2.4 National Election Observers

Other key actors were national observers who were able to travel even to more insecure areas, to which international observers had no access at all. These were agents of

the various candidates. One problem was that the number of such agents was not limited, and thus candidates with more money had more people on the ground. In some urban centres, there was not enough room in the polling stations to accommodate all the agents, which led to disputes on election day. The main independent national observation group was FEFA, which covered an estimated 60 per cent of all polling sites. FEFA played a key and bold role in terms of observing the process. It cannot be disregarded, however, that some FEFA staff were either replaced by powerful candidates or bought out.

4. Socio-economic Reality

The main socio-economic challenges facing the democratic process in Afghanistan are the widespread poverty and a population that is largely illiterate. The widespread poverty and widening income gap have led to the disillusionment of many with the government and its ability to offer services, which in turn has affected interest and participation in elections. Illiteracy is a major obstacle which excludes many from meaningful participation in elections as informed voters or potential candidates.

These factors become even more important where the majority of the voters (and the population) are young people whose alienation from the system could lead to an intensification of the conflict. Only their broad participation could bring about a legitimate state and ensure a more stable future for all citizens. In previous elections, there were a number of initiatives by young Afghans during the campaigns, targeting school and university students and the younger population in general.[9] However, these activities involved only small numbers of students and many young Afghans are not part of the formal education system. Unemployment and lack of access to institutions of higher education are a source of frustration for young women and men in Afghanistan. Young people are disillusioned with the political system and discouraged from participating in politics. In previous elections, there was a strong feeling especially among more politicised young people that the results of the elections are pre-determined. Immigration, civil war and group discrimination have prevented the emergence

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8. Afghan incumbent misses first presidential debate, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/23/AR2009072302624.html, 24 July 2009.

9. Baker, Aryn: Afghanistan's Election: The generational divide, http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1916338,00.html 19 August 2009; Moreau, Ron and Sami Yousafzai: Change they can believe in, http://www.newsweek.com/id/212791 20 August 2009.

of a sense of belonging among young people. Fears of post-election violence were linked to the presence of a large population of young, unemployed men which has the potential to engage in violent protests.

Both among young people and the older generation knowledge of the electoral system and elections is limited. One source of confusion in 2009, for example, was the large number of presidential candidates and provincial council candidates on the ballot papers. Many people were confused because they had to vote for two candidates on the same day (both presidential and provincial council candidates).

When discussing socio-economic problems, it is necessary to emphasise women's disadvantaged socio-economic status and its implications for their participation in the electoral process. Women generally have less access to education than men in Afghanistan and there are more obstacles to their involvement in the public sphere. Women also face cultural and social pressure not to attend the public meetings that were one of the main forms of political campaigning in Afghanistan, and thus many women did not have a chance to meet the candidates (either presidential or provincial council candidates) and hear their speeches.

Many of the campaigners for the candidates and campaign office staff were also usually men, which prevented them from having access to female voters. Since fewer women are educated and not all educated women can work outside the home due to security and cultural concerns, both IEC and national observer organisations had difficulty employing female workers, which in turn negatively influenced women voters' participation.

In general, civic education not only concerning elections, but also concerning civil rights in general is very weak. Even if it is provided, the methods are not participatory enough. Gaining access to final-year students at school and to young people out in the districts who are excluded from higher education is critical in shaping a more politically and rights aware new generation of Afghans.

5. External Influences

Afghanistan is at the centre of geo-political interest in the region. The dynamics of instability between Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and the Central Asian states has

come into focus more and more in recent years. It has become a truism that the insurgency cannot be fought by military forces alone: the other side of the coin is good governance provided by an Afghan state in which the population can believe. »Transition« and »Afghanisation« with regard to security and governance were the buzzwords of 2010. With troop-contributing countries looking eagerly for an exit strategy with regard to Afghanistan, these buzzwords, along with finding a political compromise with the fractured opposition and the insurgency (often referred to as reconciliation) will be a major focus of international actors with regard to Afghanistan.

The fact that there is no single »international community« becomes abundantly clear when analysing influence in Afghanistan. There are the Western nations, with the USA taking a leading role and many factions in terms of goals and strategy; there is the influence of neighbouring countries; and there is the growing role of emerging powers, such as India and China, as well as Russia. There is thus a whole clutch of international actors in the military, political and development spheres. While much attention is paid to general developments in the country, there is arguably too little focus on state institutions and encouraging the participation of the public in the process of state building.

Several international observer missions were present in the 2009 and 2010 elections in Afghanistan, with a sharp decline in the number of international observers and lower political status of many missions in 2010. Some of the main delegations included the European Union, the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), Democracy International, the International Republican Institute, the Open Society Institute and various missions from individual embassies.

Both the candidates and the international community tried to use the presence of the observer missions to reassure the public and encourage wide participation. International observer missions were seen as having a deterrent impact on fraud and as an impartial body which has no ties to either the government or candidates. An »acceptable and credible« versus a »transparent and fair« discourse was promoted by international stakeholders.

The main challenges facing international observer missions and sometimes undermining their authority was their lack of mobility and their limited reach. Allegations

of fraud in Ghazni, Paktia and Baghlan – precisely the areas that suffered from insecurity on election day and had very limited observer coverage – confirmed speculation that observers were not deployed where there were problems[10] and that they had only come in to observe well-functioning stations in the provincial centres and write »good« reports. Another barrier for international observers was their inability to speak local languages and their limited period of stay in Afghanistan which prevented them from developing a well-informed opinion on local politics and dynamics. Hence, many Afghans remarked bitterly that international observers cost a lot, but are very ineffective.

Another major area of discussion in a context like Afghanistan is the standards against which elections are measured. Many Afghans did not understand which standards the EU observers were upholding when they claimed that around 1.5 million votes – about a quarter of the whole – could have been fraudulent[11] and how the standards had changed since their 22 August press release when they had announced that the process was »largely positive«.[12] This vagueness with regard to standards and the contradictory statements from international observers led to public confusion and mistrust after the elections.

In general, many people interpreted the 2010 election as exhibiting a »hands off« approach on the part of international actors. In 2009, there was a huge internal conflict within the leadership of UNAMA. There was also the ECC, with a strong international presence. After the mess of the 2009 elections, there was considerable fatigue on the international side and too little time (plus too little political will) to implement the lessons learned. After the announcement of the final results of the 2010 election at the end of November, the UN and the USA were quick to welcome them: as some see it, desperate to move on from a messy and protracted process that leaves people feeling dissatisfied and wronged.[13]

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10. Another way of looking at this, of course, is to say that problems only occurred where there were no observers and thus there should be more national observers on the ground in these areas.

11. Karzai condemns EU's fraud claims, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/8259295.stm, 16 September 2009.

12. The holding of elections is a victory for the Afghan people, http://www.eueom-afghanistan.org/EN/PDF/Press/PressReleaseEUPrelStat220809_ENG.pdf.

13. Martine van Bijlert: 2010 Elections 34: Glossing over and moving on, Blog Afghanistan Analysts Network, 26 November 2010.

By supporting particular political groups and individuals neighbouring countries interfered in the process to a great extent. Political groups were empowered by neighbouring countries in different ways. As the nomination period was ending suddenly many people who were involved with the Taliban or were members of extremist groups in Pakistan put themselves forward. Their posters were printed in Pakistan along with fake voting cards. During this time voting cards were also collected and confiscated so people could not vote against these candidates. Hundreds of trained people from religious schools in Iran were campaigning for certain candidates in Hirat and Mazar. These individuals received money in return. For this reason too, Hazara people's participation was high in the recent election.

However, one might argue that, compared to other countries in the region the election in Afghanistan did not go so badly and the interference of the government was not as great as in other countries in the region.

6. Conclusions

Despite all the challenges there was considerable impetus among the Afghan public to go to the polls and cast their votes, sometimes pushed by strong figures in the community, sometimes on their own initiative and driven by a desire to provide a counterbalance to the rich and powerful. There is the nagging question of what sense it makes to hold parliamentary elections in Afghanistan – and what they will actually change in people's lives. While it is easy to answer this pessimistically, it might be too early to judge, at least out of respect for those voting, supporting and running in electoral processes.

However, if there is not a genuine political will to reform the political architecture, most of the Afghan population will regard elections as one more malady brought by democracy whose sole aim is to wield power and influence, ignoring the wishes and needs of the electorate. Structural and technical reforms are urgently needed, with regard to the IEC and ECC, the vetting process, the reshaping of the electoral calendar and, most importantly, a much more accurate voter registry. Last but not least, if civic education and the accountability of those elected to their electorate do not become tangible for voters, all trust and hope in elections will be lost.

About the authors

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