

Afghan vote will do little for democracy, expert says

Mike Blanchfield

Canwest News Service

Wednesday, August 19, 2009

OTTAWA - Serious doubts persisted on the eve of Thursday's Afghanistan election that the historic ballot would provide any lasting democratic gains.

"With the growing level of violence, mounting allegations of bribery and vote rigging, the Taliban insurgency now extending over almost half the country, and almost three-quarters of the electorate casting their ballots in remote, largely inaccessible rural areas, it is difficult to conceive how the presidential election - or the campaign run-up - will be construed as either free or fair," said Fen Hampson, director of the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Ottawa's Carleton University.



CREDIT: Reuters
AFGHANISTAN-.jpg

"If the election results are close and lead to a second run-off, there will be allegations from all sides that the election was a fraud, neither free nor fair - a sure prescription for further chaos and violence."

Hampson said it would take great courage for ordinary Afghan voters to dodge bullets and bombs and show up to polls.

"The real lesson here may be that elections are a trigger for a further escalation of violence and conflict in countries that are already a war zone. Barring a miracle, we may simply be throwing the seeds of democracy on parched ground."

Amnesty International denounced the Afghan government's request earlier this week that news outlets refrain from reporting violent incidents on election day in order not to discourage voter turnout.

"Freedom of expression lies at the heart of the democratic process. The Afghan government is contradicting this very principle in trying to restrict reporting by journalists at a time when the Afghan people need more information, not less," said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International's Asia Pacific program director.

Amnesty International said Afghan journalists have faced intimidation from their own government, as well as the Taliban, in the run-up to the vote.

Malou Innocent, an Afghanistan analyst with the Washington-based Cato Institute, said the election campaign has been as dysfunctional as the country itself.

"Candidates are forging alliances with warlords; tribal elders are being offered jobs, territory, and forgiveness of past sins; and Taliban militants threaten to cut off fingers marked with purple ink used to indicate when someone casts a vote," said Innocent.

"It is doubtful the Afghan elections will be a watershed moment for liberal democracy in a country that has never had a strong central government."

© Canwest News Service 2009

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2009 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.. All rights reserved.
CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.. All rights reserved.