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Afghanistan's 2010 Parliamentary Elections: Bright Spot or Blood Spot?

On September 18, 2,447 candidates, including 386 women, will compete for 249 seats in Afghanistan's Lower House of Parliament (Wolesi Jirga). Afghans courageous enough to go out and vote certainly have my respect, but for U.S. officials and policymakers, at least three delegitimizing issues should be cause for concern:

- (1) the very nature of the electoral process;
- (2) parliament's governing parameters vis-à-vis the President; and
- (3) the potential for widespread violence on election day.

First, the electoral process. In many ways, both domestic and international election-monitoring groups have learned valuable lessons from the fraud-tainted presidential election of last year. Simple methods to tamp down corruption include everything from sticking plastic coverings on completed results sheets at polling stations to improving oversight of the data-entry staff at the tally center in Kabul.

Still, elections won't be perfect. Due to a flawed voter registry, an estimated 5 million of the 17 million voters are thought to be fraudulent or listed as duplicates. Poor vetting has left warlords on the ballot, which is good or bad depending on how you view the conflict. And reports of vote buying, bribery, and intimidation are rife.

In terms of electoral institutions, the new chairman of the Independent Election Commission (IEC), an Afghan body that oversees election logistics, is generally viewed as more independent than the last chairman, who was accused of being a Karzai loyalist. However, the Electoral

Complaints Commission (ECC), the U.N.-backed election watchdog, is disproportionately weighed in favor of Karzai.

Last March, Karzai issued a decree giving him the power to appoint all five commissioners of the ECC. Up to that time, the UN appointed three members, the Supreme Court appointed one, and the IEC appointed another. Under pressure from the international community, Karzai backed down and agreed to allow the UN to appoint two members. As a diplomat in Kabul observed, "the IEC is stronger, but the ECC is weaker."

A second problem in Afghanistan's democracy is the Lower House of Parliament's level of power and influence vis-à-vis the President. During the 2005 parliamentary elections, President Karzai banned political parties, but as with warlords on the ballot, this could be good or bad.

Some might argue that a nascent democracy needs to have a strong executive in order to wield its power effectively. That may very well be true. After all, by banning political parties, Karzai effectively forced candidates to run as independents, a measure done ostensibly to prevent the emergence of a dominant political party that could oppose his relatively weak executive authority. On the flip side, by lowering the chance of potential opposition, Karzai removed democracy's most significant feature: a formal system of checks and balances. In one respect, this may signal that the Obama administration has jettisoned the lofty rhetoric of building a "flourishing democracy." Smart move.

As a counterpoint, banning political parties could thwart the potential for ethnic factionalism. But ethnic factionalism exists in other government institutions, and preventing it in parliament seems to do little for tamping down violence. Moreover, the IEC announced that around 13 percent of polling stations will be closed because of security concerns, most of which are located in the Pashtun south and east. That may result in the elections being perceived as illegitimate among the country's largest ethnic group.

Closely related to that last point, the final issue is that elections will be marred by widespread violence and threats of insecurity. The Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA), an amalgamation of various civil society organizations, has long-term observers present in all 34 provincial capitals, as well as volunteer observers at the district level. This summer, FEFA campaign observers reported widespread problems across the country. For example, death threats were exchanged between two candidates in Takhar Province, and a different Takhar candidate promised to distribute guns to voters who swore on the Holy Quran that they would support him on Election Day. And in Ghor, Nangahar, Uruzgan, and Zabul Provinces, Afghan police were either unresponsive to candidate requests for protection or provided security to candidates the security forces favored.

It's telling that Afghanistan's 2010 parliamentary elections were already pushed back from last May to this September. But regardless of when they take place, they seem something of a mixed blessing. On the one hand, democratic elections provide a constructive outlet in which political differences can be accommodated in a non-violent way. On the other hand, if the mechanisms and institutions underlying the democratic process are widely perceived as fraudulent, unstable, and inefficient, there seem to be few ways to prevent a "free and fair" election from devolving into a stage-managed shell-game.

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