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## U.S. Should Not Wait on Afghan Election to Make Troop Decision, Lawmakers Say

**Members of Congress from both parties say President Obama shouldn't delay moving forward with a new strategy until there's a credible government in place in Afghanistan.**

By Judson Berger  
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If the Obama administration waits until Afghanistan settles its presidential election before deciding whether to send in more troops, it will be making a big mistake, members of Congress from both sides of the aisle said Monday.

After the White House and a top Democrat said over the weekend that it would be irresponsible to make a troop level decision before a credible government is in place, lawmakers argued that it would make no sense for the administration to wait before moving forward with its new strategy.

"It is immaterial to this process," said Rep. Pete Hoekstra, R-Mich., ranking Republican on the House Intelligence Committee, saying it is "unbelievable" that the administration would wait for the dust to settle on Afghan politics.

"I don't think we should delay one set of decisions because of another set of variables," said Rep. Adam Smith, D-Wash., who sits on the House Armed Services and Intelligence Committees.

Smith and other officials told Foxnews.com that U.S. military and diplomatic strategy in Afghanistan is not contingent on who holds the presidency there, and that to put off a decision because the election is unresolved places undue importance on the central government.

Lawmakers said a runoff would be a desirable and effective way to lend some needed legitimacy to the Afghan government and undermine insurgents' recruiting efforts. But they said neither U.S. strategy nor the corrupt nature of the Afghan government would change if Afghan President Hamid Karzai's top challenger, Abdullah Abdullah, ends up winning.

The call to wait for resolution first came from Sen. John Kerry, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who said in an interview aired Sunday that it would be "entirely irresponsible" for President Obama to commit more troops while the election is undecided.

Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel said Sunday on CNN that it would be "reckless" to make a troop decision without a "thorough analysis of whether in fact there's an Afghan partner ready to fill that space that the U.S. troops would create."

Afghanistan appeared headed toward a possible runoff election Monday, as a United Nations-backed panel ruled that thousands of ballots in the August election were fraudulent. Karzai refused to accept the findings. But should a runoff be approved it might not be held until spring, since harsh Afghanistan winters would make it almost impossible for some people to make it to the polls.

Rep. Joe Sestak, D-Pa., who also sits on the Armed Services Committee, said such a potentially drawn-out period of indecision would provide a window for insurgents to strengthen their hold.

"We should not delay what I believe might be a final opportunity not to have to fall back on a containment strategy," Sestak told Foxnews.com. He said the U.S. approach to the Afghanistan central government already "accepts that it is corrupt."

Rep. Howard P. "Buck" McKeon, R-Calif., the ranking Republican on the House Armed Services Committee, also released a written statement urging Obama not to wait for the election to be over.

"Are the Taliban waiting for these results to be released before they attack our troops and Afghan civilians?" he asked.

It's not clear whether the White House would seriously consider waiting, should the election process drag on for months.

White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs on Monday said it's important for the Afghan election be legitimate and stressed that the central government must be "credible" for the U.S. strategy to succeed.

"None of this is going to work without credible partners. We certainly understand that in this entire process," he said.

But he did not specifically say that the administration wants to wait until the election results are final before issuing a decision on strategy and troop levels.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said Karzai will announce Tuesday how he plans to resolve the standoff and that she is "encouraged" by the situation. She said she expects a resolution in the coming days, and that it's possible to hold a run-off before winter sets in.

Malou Innocent, foreign policy analyst with the Cato Institute, said there is a legitimate reason to hold off on a change in strategy in the midst of the election turmoil.

"The United States doesn't want to appear to be backing up an illegitimate government so there's a hesitancy to surge more forces," she said. Innocent said it's more important for the United States that a runoff be held than that a particular candidate win.

"They want to just finish the process," she said.

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