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Marred Afghan elections could undercut U.S. strategy

by Matthew Rusling

WASHINGTON, Sept. 18 (Xinhua) -- Allegations of fraud may undercut the credibility of recent Afghan presidential elections, dealing a serious blow to U.S. efforts to shore up a legitimate government in the war-torn nation, experts said.

The controversial election occurred amid the backdrop of rising violence that has prompted U.S. military commanders to request additional troops -- levels are already expected to rise to 68,000 this year -- in a bid to control the embattled country.

International and Afghan election observers said last month's vote was marked by widespread fraud and misconduct. Afghan President Hamid Karzai's rival, Abdullah Abdullah, claims Karzai's supporters stuffed ballot boxes in areas where voter turnout was low because of Taliban violence.

A United Nations-backed commission has ordered a recount at 10 percent of the country's polling stations, the head of the panel said Tuesday. Karzai currently leads with 54 percent, which could allow him to avoid a runoff if the final count falls short of a 50 percent majority.

The election was dealt another blow on Wednesday when a European Union commission to monitor elections said more than 1 million votes were suspicious.

The U.S. strategy rests on a "clear, hold, build" mantra that aims to "clear" areas of Taliban forces, "hold" those locations and "build" the nation's economy and infrastructure. That, experts said, would thwart Taliban recruiting efforts and create a more stable and democratic country.

A crucial part of the plan is establishing a credible Afghan government. But the controversial elections, coupled with many Afghans' loss of faith in U.S. forces, are causing a number of analysts to cast doubts on the United States' ability to create a democratic Afghanistan.

Malou Innocent, foreign policy analyst at the Washington-based Cato Institute, said the tainted elections would affect U.S. objectives no matter what the outcome is.

"In either way this election has been a failure for the foreign forces," she concluded.

If Karzai wins, Afghans would view the victory as the United States propping up an illegitimate government. And if he loses, it would sideline the Pashtuns -- the country's largest ethnic group-- to which Karzai belongs, she reasoned.

Simon Henderson, director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said the disputed election was unfortunate but not unexpected.

"It's not as if Afghanistan has a track record for free and fair elections," he remarked. "Most Afghans have an ambivalent attitude toward central government."

Jonathan Morgenstein, senior policy fellow at the Washington-based Third Way, said U.S. objectives may prove difficult if Afghanistan's government is perceived as illegitimate. However, the United States was attempting to mitigate the situation by developing local government and working with the police to stamp out corruption within its ranks.

But corruption at the top does not undermine Afghanistan's army-- to which U.S. military leaders aim to hand over security duties-- which he contends is the nation's most respected institution. The United States could win if it sticks to its strategy and dedicates all the resources necessary, he said.

Still, while the elections may not derail U.S. plans, they could inflict a certain degree of damage. "Obviously it hurts," Morgenstein said. "No one wanted to see this occur this way. Everyone is disappointed."

He added, however, that there was one silver lining: Many Afghan civilians had stepped forward to document alleged instances of corruption. The reason for this was that Afghans felt empowered to publically debate pertinent issues other than ethnicity, he said.

Many, however, note that the clock is ticking. Congress wants to see results, and some lawmakers have hinted they might pull funding if progress stagnates.

Along with fear over the conflict's outcome are re-emerging analogies with the U.S. conflict in Vietnam. Some experts warn that the United States must avoid the misconception -- among Afghans and Americans alike -- that its military was fighting to prop up an incompetent and corrupt government. Many historians said this was the case in South Vietnam when the United States supported President Ngo Dinh Diem.

Morgenstein, however, dismissed the comparison, adding that Karzai's past lashing out at the Obama administration demonstrates Afghan independence.

Still, many analysts are casting a doubtful eye on U.S. efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. For her part, Innocent believed the entire U.S. strategy was fundamentally flawed. Afghanistan was a deeply divided, mostly rural, tribal society. To expect Western-style democracy to take root there was unrealistic, she said.

Another fatal flaw, she said, was that the United States was equating the Taliban -- an organization with no global agenda -- with the international terror group Al-Qaeda and hunting down the wrong enemy. "When we lump the two groups together, we might be (in Afghanistan) in perpetuity," she said.

Morgenstein, however, warned against withdrawing U.S. forces. A withdrawal would mean a return to chaos. And with today's easy cross-border communication, this could cause instability near the border with China, he said.

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