

Preliminary results in Afghan election show Karzai victory

Occupying powers debate moves against incumbent president

By Tom Eley
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Full preliminary results from Afghanistan's recent presidential elections show incumbent president Hamid Karzai winning 54.6 percent of the vote, enough to avoid a run-off election, according to the pro-Karzai election commission tasked with vote-counting.

The election has been accompanied by allegations of massive vote-rigging. The US, the UK, the European Union and the United Nations have opposed formal recognition of a Karzai victory until allegations of fraud are investigated and a recount is completed. However, there are mounting concerns in Washington and the European capitals that an unresolved election, potentially dragging on for months, could fuel the popular insurgency against the US-led occupation.

On Wednesday, a suicide bomber attacked a NATO convoy on the main road to the Kabul airport, killing six Italian soldiers and four Afghan civilians, and wounding dozens more. On Tuesday, three US soldiers were killed by a roadside bomb, and on Wednesday, a British soldier succumbed to combat wounds suffered days earlier.

Forty-six coalition soldiers have been killed so far in September. At the current pace, September's casualties would exceed the record set last month, when 77 NATO soldiers died. President Barack Obama's "surge" has also resulted in hundreds, perhaps thousands, of civilian deaths in Afghanistan and the border regions of Pakistan.

After overwhelming evidence of massive electoral fraud shattered Washington's claims that the August 20 national elections represented a major "democratic advance" by the Afghan people, the Obama administration shifted footing, seizing on the fraud to sideline, and potentially remove, Karzai.

Now this improvisation is threatened with yet another debacle. Even if an analysis of votes reveals that enough fraud took place to alter the outcome of the election, there is little chance a run-off or new election can be managed before the harsh Afghan winter makes large swathes of the country impassable. This would leave the Karzai regime in power for another half year—but even more discredited and unstable than before the election.

As the *New York Times* put it, "The wait for a runoff could

leave Afghanistan with a power vacuum at a time when Taliban attacks are increasing, and undermine support abroad for a war backing an apparently corrupt administration."

Nonetheless, Western allegations against the veracity of the election continue to mount.

EU election monitors this week announced that more than 1.1 million of the votes cast for Karzai may be fraudulent. The figure is evidently based on accusations, originally published in the *New York Times*, that the Afghan election authority (the Independent Election Commission, or IEC) relaxed ballot standards to secure 50 percent of the vote for Karzai and avert a run-off.

"They were supposed to be red-flagged and were not," said Maria Espinosa, an EU observer. "We can't speculate on how many [votes] are bad, but they should be investigated."

If the accusations of the EU observers hold true, it would be more than enough to drive the Karzai vote below 50 percent, and thus force a second round of voting against Abdullah Abdulla, Karzai's former foreign minister, who officially won 27 percent of the vote.

In response to these allegations, the Afghan IEC accused the EU monitors of overstepping their role by questioning calculations. "They have not the right to interfere in the commission," said IEC chief Daoud Ali Najafi "Where do they get these figures?"

The Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC), the UN-endorsed body that has the ultimate authority to approve or invalidate the election results, has ordered that ballots from approximately 10 percent of the nation's precincts be recounted. The ECC has already tossed out results from 83 polling stations, all of which voted heavily for Karzai.

Afghan election officials have said that they cannot possibly complete a recount of the 10 percent of polling stations singled out by the EEC before October snows make inaccessible the nation's expansive mountainous areas.

Candace Rondeaux, a Kabul-based representative of the International Crisis Group, accused the Karzai regime of intentionally delaying the recount. "It's very clear that they plan to foot-drag until the very last minute until the first snow,"

Rondeaux said. "I think indications are clear that there are many IEC officials that are involved in the fraud so if they have the capacity to steal the vote of Afghan voters then they should have the capacity to investigate how that happened."

The pro-Karzai IEC and the UN-backed EEC have engaged in a tit-for-tat public squabble this week. The IEC claims it has proposed to the EEC that the recount be limited to only those precincts where over 100 percent of the electorate voted, leaving aside those that voted by a margin of more than 95 percent for one or another candidate, as the EEC originally demanded.

The head of the EEC, Canadian Grant Kippin, claims that no such proposal has been received. "They [the IEC] are driving the process and we are waiting for them to get back to us on the procedures, timelines, and resources needed," said Kippin.

For its part, the Obama administration repeated its assertion that the election is not over. "They're not final, and we're still waiting for the certified results," State Department spokesman Ian Kelly said. "The certified results will only come after the independent electoral commission and the electoral complaints commission has carried out their investigations thoroughly, and done all the required audits and recounts."

Yet Karzai has all but declared victory. "[Karzai] is clearly leading in the elections and we have bypassed the 50 percent benchmark that is required for someone to win the first round," spokesman Waheed Omar said. "We hope that when the certified results are announced, we will win the election in the first round."

The acrimonious exchanges between the Kabul regime and Western officials reveal Karzai's increasingly tenuous position.

There is a widespread belief in Washington and the European capitals that Karzai has become an impediment to the effort to subjugate Afghanistan, a result of the regime's corruption and its occasional criticisms of mass NATO killings of Afghan civilians. But there are disagreements over how, and when, Karzai should be sidelined.

The dilemma came to the fore this week when American Peter Galbraith, the number-two UN official in Afghanistan, had a public falling out with his Norwegian boss, Kai Eide. Galbraith abruptly left the country for Vermont, where he has been placed on "mission" for a month.

It appears that Galbraith spearheaded the criticism of the Karzai regime's alleged involvement in vote fraud. It was likely Galbraith who first accused the IEC of violating its own vote-counting rules in order to ensure that Karzai would not face a run-off election.

Canada's *National Post* reports that Galbraith (who is the son of the noted liberal economist, the late John Kenneth Galbraith) wanted results from 1,000 precincts annulled, and recounts at 5,000 more. This would have left uninvestigated only 500 precincts. Eide, instead, wanted recounts at 1,000 stations,

arguing that the UN should not be viewed by Afghans as riding roughshod over local authorities.

Meanwhile, media attacks on Karzai in the US and UK sharpened.

On Tuesday, the *Times* of London wrote that Karzai should "acknowledge the charges of fraud, co-operate with the investigators and address the charges laid against him by Dr. Abdullah," the *Times* insisted. Instead, Karzai's response to the election crisis has "polarised the country, fuelled the allegations of corruption, angered the commanders of the Nato troops killed as they attempted to safeguard the election and encouraged the Taliban in their insurrection."

"The election fraud is a political scandal, a blatant attempt to deceive the Afghan people and entrench in power a corrupt administration," the *Times* fulminated. "It is now high time that the allies asserted the minimum conditions of a deployment that has cost huge sums and many lives."

Writing in the September 15 *New York Times*, Joseph Kearns Goodwin, who recently served as an attache to a NATO communications unit in Afghanistan, made similar denunciations of Karzai.

"Electoral chicanery pales in comparison to the systemic, day-to-day corruption within the administration of President Hamid Karzai," Kearns Goodwin writes. "People were so incensed with the current government's misdeeds that I often heard the disturbing refrain: 'If Karzai is re-elected, then I am going to join the Taliban.'"

"The international community's reluctance to fight corruption head-on has inextricably linked it with the despised administration," concludes Kearns Goodwin, who is the son of the liberal presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin. "As we continue to give unequivocal support to a crooked government, our credibility is greatly diminished and the difficulty of our mission greatly increased."

The vitriol of these attacks suggest that, with the likelihood of a run-off election in doubt, Washington may turn toward other means of dispensing with Karzai. This could include the formation of some form of coalition government, in which Karzai's role would be reduced, or else the creation of a new prime ministerial post that would appropriate powers from the Afghan presidency, something akin to an imperial viceroy.

Another possibility, hinted at in the US media for months, is the "Diem" option. The reference is to the corrupt puppet dictator of South Vietnam, whose assassination was endorsed by US President John F. Kennedy in 1963, and which preceded a rapid escalation of the war in Vietnam.

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