

Afghanistan election debacle deepens as Abdullah pulls out of runoff

By Bill Van Auken
2 November 2009

The Obama administration's crisis over its planned escalation of the war in Afghanistan deepened over the weekend with the decision by President Hamid Karzai's challenger, Abdullah Abdullah, to pull out of a US-engineered election runoff.

Abdullah, a former "foreign minister in exile" for the warlords of the Northern Alliance, who, after the US invasion of 2001, occupied the same position in the Karzai regime, announced Sunday that he would not participate in the runoff election scheduled for next Saturday.

Washington forced the runoff on Karzai in an attempt to whitewash the massive fraud committed in the presidential election last August. A United Nations panel confirmed that nearly a third of Karzai's votes were fraudulent and that he had fallen just short of the absolute majority needed to avoid a second round.

Abdullah indicated that there was no reason to believe that similar ballot-stuffing would not take place in the runoff. In talks with Karzai, he had demanded that the Afghan president's allies in charge of the country's election commission, who engineered the fraudulent vote last August, be dismissed. Karzai rejected the demand.

Abdullah, whose campaign also engaged in ballot-stuffing, stopped short of calling for a boycott of the runoff election and urged his supporters not to stage protests. He repeatedly appealed for "national unity" and insisted that he had made his decision "to give the people of Afghanistan a chance to move on." He denied that he had withdrawn "in exchange for anything from anybody."

The Obama administration and its allies have responded to Abdullah's withdrawal with the absurd contention that the fact that the challenger in the runoff has refused to participate because of his conviction that the vote will once again be stolen in no way affects the "legitimacy" of the Afghan electoral process. This has been combined with unmistakable signals that Washington wants to see the second round cancelled altogether in favor of a court decree proclaiming Karzai the winner.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has provided the most

laughable justifications for the electoral fiasco in Afghanistan, insisting that there is really nothing illicit or even unusual involved.

On a stop in the United Arab Emirates, she argued that the Afghanistan election was little different than those held in the United States. "We see that happen in our own country where, for whatever combination of reasons, one of the candidates decides not to go forward," she said.

Clinton repeatedly insisted that Abdullah's withdrawal in no way affected the legitimacy of the election. When President Karzai bowed to US demands to accept a runoff, she claimed, "that bestowed legitimacy from that moment forward," regardless of whether the vote took place.

A statement issued by the State Department over Clinton's signature praised Abdullah for waging a "dignified and constructive campaign." It continued, "It is now a matter for the Afghan authorities to decide on a way ahead that brings this electoral process to a conclusion in line with the Afghan constitution."

Appearing on the CBS News program "Face the Nation," Obama's senior advisor David Axelrod indicated that the administration wants a quick end to the election controversy. "We are going to deal with the government that is there," he said. "And obviously there are issues we need to discuss, such as reducing the high level of corruption. These are issues we'll take up with President Karzai."

There was no indication that anyone in the US administration was appealing for Abdullah to reconsider his action and take part in the runoff election.

This poses the obvious question of why Clinton, Senator John Kerry, Obama's Afghanistan-Pakistan special envoy Richard Holbrooke and others spent days browbeating Karzai into accepting the runoff, which they insisted was the only way to legitimize the election.

Whether Washington ever really wanted the runoff to transpire, it certainly appears to want no part of it now.

According to the *Washington Post*, US Ambassador to Afghanistan Gen. Karl Eikenberry, together with the chief UN official in the country, Kai Eide, had attempted to

negotiate a power-sharing deal between Karzai and Abdullah, continuing talks into Saturday night.

“During the talks, Abdullah demanded the removal of three key election officials, suspension of three cabinet members and constitutional changes that would give him a say in the appointment of ministers and in major policy decisions,” the *Post* reported. Karzai rejected the deal on Sunday morning, with Abdullah announcing his withdrawal shortly thereafter.

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown issued a deliberately vague statement in response to Abdullah’s withdrawal, saying he was confident that “Afghanistan’s leaders will support the remaining steps of the democratic process.” Only a week before, Brown was among those insisting a runoff was indispensable.

The collapse of the runoff election that the Obama administration had insisted would grant the puppet regime legitimacy, marks another setback in the US drive to defeat the resistance to its occupation of Afghanistan. No vote could have eliminated the stench of corruption from Karzai and his cohorts. But the fact that Washington, having chosen Karzai as Afghanistan’s president and dictated his regime’s policies for eight years, is incapable of even staging such an election is indicative of the crisis dominating US policy in the country.

If the runoff were held, it would be every bit as much an illegitimate farce as the first round. Turnout was expected to be significantly lower than last August, when barely a third of eligible voters cast ballots. And the same kind of ballot-stuffing was inevitable.

With the Taliban threatening to disrupt any vote with armed attacks, it would have required a major redeployment of US troops and entailed another potential spike in casualties.

The apparent collapse of the runoff has created further confusion around Obama’s protracted deliberation on strategy and troop levels for Afghanistan. Administration officials had indicated that he was waiting for the results of the November 7 ballot to make a decision, and it was expected that he would announce his policy after that date and before he is to embark on a nine-day Asian tour on November 11.

Now it appears it will be pushed back further. In his television appearance Sunday, Axelrod said that he expected “the president to make a decision within weeks.”

Last Friday, Obama met with the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the White House to discuss the proposal of Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the senior US commander in Afghanistan, to send another 44,000 troops into the country to wage an intensified counterinsurgency campaign.

Obama reportedly asked the chiefs what the impact of

such a deployment would be on the all-volunteer military, which has been placed under prolonged strain by the simultaneous wars and occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

According to the *Washington Post*, Obama asked the chiefs to “provide him with more options for troop levels,” suggesting that the administration may be considering sending less troops than requested by McChrystal. It is generally acknowledged, however, that whenever the final decision is made it will involve the deployment of tens of thousands of additional soldiers and Marines.

Two more US soldiers were killed Saturday by roadside bombs in southern Afghanistan, bringing the death toll to 59 for October, the bloodiest month for American forces since the war began eight years ago. At the present rate, the number of US troops killed in the Afghan war will top 1,000 before the end of the year.

Another explosion Sunday claimed the life of a British soldier in Helmand Province, bringing the number of British troops killed over the last eight years to 224.

A further indication of the costs of the US war was provided by an article published in the *Washington Post* Saturday indicating that 1,000 US troops have been wounded in Afghanistan over the past three months, with a “dramatic increase in amputees and other seriously injured service members.”

US troops in Afghanistan are being wounded at a higher rate than in Iraq at the highpoint of US casualties there in 2007, the *Post* reported.

According to the Pentagon, between 70 and 80 percent of casualties suffered by US and other occupation troops are the result of roadside bombs.

“Walter Reed’s Ward 57 provides wrenching proof of the devastating effectiveness of the bombs, with patients suffering amputations, spinal cord damage, traumatic brain injuries and fractures,” the *Post* reported. “The ward is pretty full now,” Tracy Glascoe, a physician’s assistant at the Washington, DC Army hospital told the newspaper.

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