



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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The Afghan Elections: What Really Happened? What Will Happen Now?

United States Institute of Peace

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The United States Institute of Peace hosted a roundtable event examining the recent Afghan elections and their future implications. The expert panel included **Noah Coburn**, a traditional justice specialist for USIP and presidential fellow, who spent 18 months researching local political structures north of Kabul; **John Dempsey** is the former USAID advisor to the Afghanistan Ministry of Justice and is currently a USIP head of office in Afghanistan and a rule of law advisor that has contributed to the new Rule of Law Strategy in Afghanistan. **Palwasha Hassan** serves as the Country Director for the NGO Rights and Democracy in Afghanistan, she has worked for than fifteen years in women's development in the country and is currently a Jennings Randolph Fellow at USIP. The event was moderated by **J. Alexander Their**, director for Afghanistan and Pakistan at USIP, he has served as a rule of law advisor, was a member of the Afghanistan Study Group and has co-authored the book *The Future of Afghanistan* (USIP, 2009).

The event was structured as a led conversation, with Their moderating by asking questions of each speaker in lieu of prepared statements. Mr. Dempsey gave a general overview of the current situation in Afghanistan, noting that everyone is still waiting on results, but that most Afghans, including many well-educated, see **President Karzai** as the inevitable winner even if a recount were to occur. He then briefly discussed the technical roles of the Afghan Independent Election Commission in certifying the vote and the U.N.-backed Electoral Complaints Commission in checking for fraud. Since August, the IEC, appointed by Karzai, had been releasing ballot results incrementally, with Karzai building a one to two percent lead with each release. Of late, however, the IEC and Mr. Karzai have pushed through a large number of results, leaving inconsistencies for the ECC to sort out, and the president has been winning with each release closer to six percent gains over his closest challenger, **Abdullah Abdullah**. While the IEC has ultimate authority over the vote count, Mr. Dempsey felt the ECC provides public transparency.

Discussing the demographics of voters, Coburn talked about his research on voting blocs and individual reasons for voting, which included a duty to the country and a duty to Islam as well as a large mobilization efforts by the tribal elders, mullahs and other leaders. In the rural regions the vote was used by leaders to create a census, using a high turnout in a province to petition for increased aid. Urban voters, particularly the Hazara, were very concerned about the presidential candidates, while rural voters in two provinces north of Kabul used the election as a referendum on the provincial warlords, one of whom was Karzai's regional election advisor and the other was Abdullah's. In addition, the prevalence of bloc voting, in which a tribal leader guarantees the vote of his lineage or village, seems to have been borne out by the election results.

Hassan talked about her surprise over the number of women's votes recorded in Pashtun provinces and told of the difficulty to confirm women's votes because election officials would often give a woman's ballot to a male family member. She did note that women do indeed vote, even in the south, and that

this election has seen a rise in the perceived value of a woman's vote and successful efforts to mobilize women candidates. All things considered, she was very positive about turnout of women voters. The relative success of **Ramazan Bashardost**, a minority Hazara, was also seen as a subtle shift from the tribal-based voting of the last elections.

The conversation then centered on ideas of legitimacy. Dempsey believes that Karzai's decision to surround himself with people of "sordid" backgrounds, who are held immune from the law, deals a severe blow to his legitimacy within the country. As a result the Taliban has been able to capitalize on these misgivings and the president's inability to provide basic services. Hassan sees the need for development as the crucial pillar of legitimacy. No matter who is elected, the government must build its support through proper investment in development rather than security alone. Coburn echoed the importance of development and argued that President Karzai is seen as more legitimate because of his proven track record to secure international aid. The argument over whether security or development creates the most credibility depends upon the needs of the region in question.

Dempsey then laid out the short-term and long-term needs to build the rule of law. Long-term, the government needs to build the capacity of the Ministry of Justice in all provinces and in the short-term Karzai needs to shift perceptions by working with coalition forces to make high-profile arrests of warlords. Hassan did not think arrests were realistic goals in light of the government's dependence on warlord money and power. She believes there is a need for an international agreement to force countries to withdraw support for individual warlords. Coburn asserted that the international focus on engaging subnational groups has been one of the few successes of the election. There was a high interest in provincial council seats, which are seen as ways for smaller communities to exert their influence in favor of people that will eventually springboard from the councils to the parliament. This increased attention is seen as an important step forward.

When the event was opened to other questions, Dempsey stressed the need to wait for the final results of the ECC checks, but that the international community does have considerable leverage in the situation. Using aid to shape reform, however, must be carefully balanced. Coburn explained that the nature of corruption varies widely in Afghanistan (ranging from blatant fraud to exerting tribal influence), but that the issue is not greatly discussed in the country. Hassan believes that there will not be a popular uprising should Karzai win without a runoff and that the government must focus on raising salaries for civil servants.

Dempsey then focused on the success of the international community to work directly with rural communities while stressing the need to not ignore Kabul. Hassan said that the international community needs to support the institutions it established and not attempt to directly pressure Karzai for change.

Concluding the panel, Dempsey was not optimistic that the Afghans would be able to overcome technical election issues before June, but he felt that the country should develop a reliable voter registry. He also thought that Afghans believed the U.S. had chosen Karzai to lead and so they are not very interested in a runoff election. Hassan stressed the need to wait for a certified vote and said that the West should not waste its investment in Afghan institutions. Coburn sees the parliamentary election as an opportunity to make good on promises to engage moderate members of the Taliban. However, the 2010 elections will likely receive much less media coverage and he fears that if the current presidential election is decided in a back room, then the country will lose its budding hopes for a vibrant, functioning civil society.