



THE AFGHAN ELECTIONS: ANOTHER MILESTONE ON THE ROAD TO NOWHERE?

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Democracy is not a religion, and elections are not a religious festival. Democracy – or to be more precise – representative government, is a *potential* way of improving the quality of governance, the services it provides, security, and national stability. For everyone but those elected to office, and paid as a result, its legitimacy depends on two things: First, the effectiveness of the actual government, and second, the evidence that it is the most successful option.

The debates and reporting over the legislative elections in Afghanistan largely ignore this reality. The election is being praised for the fact that they occurred at all, there were lots of candidates, many Afghans voted in spite of the security threat, and they seem to have been less corrupt than the Presidential elections. It is being attacked on the grounds that many polling places were closed, the turnout dropped, there were some serious security problems, and they resulted in a host of charges of fraud and abuse. In short, the focus is on the quality of the election process, and not on whether it will produce meaningful and positive results in terms of improved governance and Afghan popular support of the government.

It may be too soon to judge the election by these criteria, but it is not too soon to understand that they are not dependent on the “purity” of the election, but on far different criteria for “legitimacy.” It also is not too early to start asking some very hard questions about the future of Afghan governance that should have been asked in drafting the Afghan constitution and in setting up a new Afghan government.

First, exactly what is it that the legislature actually does? How effective is the structure?

It is far from clear that those who drafted the Afghan constitution and set up a new Afghan government, really addressed the functional purpose of the legislature in shaping the quality of Afghan governance as distinguished from its potential role in politics.

So far, the primary answer of what the legislature actually does may be that it is a well-paid forum in a secure area that offers opportunities for patronage, and is dominated by Afghan power brokers. What is not clear is that it has more than marginal impact in improving governance in a country where ISAF surveys show that more than half of its 360+ districts lack effective governance in any form.

Most of the time, the grossly over-centralized structure of the Afghan government, the powers of its President, and real government by power brokers and influence peddling, seem to relegate the legislature to the role of a debating society that is often largely irrelevant outside Kabul. When it does act, it seems to be by occasionally saying “no,” although it is not clear this is usually for the right reason and said in the right way.

To put it bluntly, the legislature's merits to date have been roughly the same merits as Mark Twain's talking dog: What is important has not consisted of what it has said or done, but rather the fact it could talk at all. Will this election make any difference? Any positive answer is at best uncertain.

Second, is the current form of an elected legislature the most successful option?

- While the current Afghan legislature may well be better than no legislature at all, that is scarcely much of a test of merit. This involves problems that go well beyond the fact that it has been superimposed on a nation that lacks both an effective central government, and a working structure of local and provincial representative government.
- As in Iraq, the US made the tacit assumption in forming the legislature that responsible national political parties would appear by magic to give the political process meaning. And like in Iraq, they did not. The fact that some 2500+ candidates ran for office in nation without structured political parties, and where virtually all the candidates lack political experience and experience in governance, means that the election produced roughly nine times as many losers per seat as winners.

The losers often represent competing power brokers, tribes, and factions – none of whom have had much reason to be grateful to the government before the election, and many of which are now going to be angry about losing. Far too many of the winners only won because they have the money and influence to buy votes. They now have to try to recoup the expense. Others won almost arbitrarily.

The winners also lack an effective structure of legislative oversight, and the power to control the budget effectively. Some of these problems may be offset by reforms that attempt to improve the control of Ministries, strengthen the legislature, and create more effective and better-funded provincial and central governments. So far, however, there is a deafening silence as to whether these changes will improve governance, simply create more local factions, or create the equivalent of political machine politics where central, regional, and local leaders create a political power base instead of a political party.

Again, recent ISAF maps of the districts where government actually works are an acute warning of how critical these problems are. So are the maps that show the level of support for the central government by district, and the maps of effectiveness of security and development efforts. There may well be a positive trend in these maps since June – although ISAF seems to have stopped issuing them in unclassified form.

But, to the extent any such improvement exists, it may well be the result of military action and more security – not improved Afghan governance. If the war is to be won, there must be major progress in government services, the rule of law, and employment at the local level in population centers. It is far from clear that the current Afghan legislature will – or can – make a major difference in carrying out such improvements unless it is

given a better structure and role, and much stronger provincial, district, and urban governance emerges in ways that actually serve the people.

Third, will the election improve Afghan popular support of the government and the war effort?

The election may have little or no benefit in terms of shaping Afghan popular support or the overall war effort -- although it is far too early to be certain and this is an area where serious research and polling are badly needed. An election with no clear political goals or platforms, over 2,200 losers, many self-seeking winners who bought their way to victory, many claims of fraud, and that had to largely exclude the Afghans who suffer most from the war and are most under Taliban influence does have a few minor problems -- many of which will play out in different local context over the coming months and leave a legacy for years.

There are disturbing signs that Afghans are shifting away from a focus on democracy and away from support for a national legislature. It is hard to put such trends in perspective because recent reports and polls on Afghan opinion have not been designed to measure how Afghans actually perceive their legislature -- as distinguished from the overall process of governance -- and so much of the turnout responds to pressure by local and national power brokers and/or payments.

Polls do show corruption is broadly perceived as problem, but at least as much at the local, provincial, ANSF, and overall level of government as at the Karzai level. Afghans are all too well aware that the Afghan government and Afghan police can sometimes be as much of a threat as the insurgents. They have seen the same reports as we have that the government's anti-corruption effort foundered in late August when Karzai fired a key prosecutor -- Fazel Ahmed Faqiryar, the former deputy attorney general. Faqiryar told *The New York Times* that Karzai and Attorney General Mohammed Ishaq Aloko refused to allow any action to be taken against corrupt leaders. He said that cases built against current or former Afghan officials, including 17 members of Karzai's cabinet, 5 provincial governors, and at least 3 ambassadors had not gone forward. Moreover, another 22 cases were halted or ignored without explanation.ⁱ

Yet, Afghan concerns with these issues must be kept in perspective. There is little evidence that Afghans see corruption as a crisis, or that this drives their perceptions of the government and the course of the war, their votes, or their interest in the legislature.

A poll carried out in May 2010 by the Afghan Center for Socio-Economic and Opinion Research (ACSOR/D3) and Langer Research Associates -- which built on a long series of ABC/BBC/ARD polls, found that only 8 percent felt corruption was the single most important issue in bringing stability to the country. Only 23 percent felt it was one of the top three issues, peaking at 31 percent in the south. The poll found that compared to 50 percent who called security the single top issue, 75 percent called it one of their three top concerns.

The poll found these views were less positive in the South, which is the focus of the war but which also was often excluded from the vote. There, 45 percent said the country's going in the right direction, 55 percent expected improvements in their own lives and 51 percent expected better lives for their children – respectively, 18, 11 and 10 points lower than the national figures.

How Does the Legislative Election Reflect Overall Afghan Concerns with Democracy?

There are polls that show continued Afghan popular support for “democracy,” but none of these polls test Afghan understanding of what the word means or what they expect from it. Moreover, the trends in such results are anything but positive. None focus on their perceptions of whether they feel the legislature per se serves their interests. At the same time, their concern for security shows a rising trend in the search for any form of strong leader and political accommodation.

The ACSOR/D3 poll again provides some important insights and warnings. It found strong Afghan popular support for Karzai, and growing preference for both a strong leader, and an Islamic government, rather than “democracy:”

In May 2010, 71 percent of Afghans declared themselves as satisfied with the outcome of the election that saw Hamid Karzai return to power as president, little changed from 75 percent in late December. But the number who were “very satisfied” with this outcome was just 27 percent – down 10 points.

Moreover, preference for democracy as the best political system for Afghanistan at this time fell from 32 percent in December 2009 to 23 percent in May. As can happen in some societies in times of crisis, preference for a “strong leader” – “where one man rules for life and has final say in all political matters” – rose, by 7 points, to 30 percent, surpassing preference for democracy. And a plurality in this nearly entirely Muslim nation continued to prefer an Islamic state, 45 percent.

There was a similar increase in support for a “strong leader” in Iraq as that country fell into a spiral of violence in 2007. That reversed course and fell dramatically by early 2009 as relative security in Iraq was restored. At the same time, in polling from 2004-2009, support for an Islamic state in Iraq never remotely approached its levels in Afghanistan.

The same poll also found rising support for negotiations with the Taliban – if this meant an end to the fighting – and a surprising confidence in local security as distinguished from a lack of faith in the overall national trend. These are further warnings that a legislative election that does not produce tangible results that benefit the Afghan people in the areas they find most important may be as likely to have a negative result as a positive one – regardless of debates over how well it was held. This indicates that much more may depend on the success of the war effort, and bringing effective security, government services, and development than on what happens in a legislature that has little or no practical or perceptual impact on most Afghans.

Another poll provides similar insights in this area. A poll sponsored by the International Council on Security and Development (ICOS) conducted field research in Helmand province (in Garmsir, Marjah, Nawa and Lashkar Gah City) and Kandahar province (in

Khakrez, Panjwayi, Spin Boldak and Kandahar City) in June 2010 and was conducted by a team of Afghan researchers, coordinated by international ICOS staff, involving 552 Afghan men.

Although polls that ask Afghans about “democracy” present obvious problems in a country where so few have any practical understanding of what “democracy” really means, the ICOS poll found that only 40% of Afghans felt democracy was important to them and 55% felt it was not.

The good news is the same poll found that 72% felt an elected government would be better for their children than a government by the Taliban, and that 72% of Afghans felt that local jirgas were effective in their community. *But*, these are indicators that Taliban’s extremism remains uncertain and the quality of government at the local level is what counts. They are scarcely a ringing endorsement of “democracy,” or any great hope the national legislature will benefit them in the near future.

Priorities for the Future

There is a real need to continue to try to improve the Afghan election process, but it needs to be done quietly and steadily and tied to a primary focus on the quality of governance and winning the war. If there are any punchlines to Afghan election, they are that yet another agonizing, *public* Western focus on the problems in the “purity” or legitimacy of this election is the last thing Afghans need. The same is true of efforts to praise the elections that are decoupled from any analysis of whether it actually benefits them.

What is needed is a much clearer picture of what can be done to make the legislature more effective in winning Afghan popular support by finding roles for it that materially benefit their lives. More important, any such effort has a significantly lower priority than concentrating on improvements in the quality of security, government services, prompt justice, and basic economic conditions at the local level.

ⁱ Dexter Filkins and Alissa J. Rubin, "Graft Fighting Prosecutor is Dismissed in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, August 28, 2010