

U.S. Runs Afghan Polls: But What Next?

by Ramtanu Maitra

Despite repeated threats issued by the anti-Kabul and anti-U.S militant groups prior to the Oct. 9 Election Day, Afghanistan's first-ever Presidential poll went off peacefully. The election, however, was full of irregularities, and at the time of writing, after five full days, the vote counting has finally begun.

It is evident that the outcome was determined prior to the poll. The U.S.-backed Afghan Interim President, Hamid Karzai, will be the first Afghan President, but it is also clear that his control over Afghanistan will remain confined to the capital, Kabul, and its immediate periphery.

Some analysts have pointed out that one of the reasons why the poll was relatively peaceful is that Karzai, with the help of the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, had worked out a deal to obtain support from a faction of the Taliban to support Karzai, because he is an ethnic Pushtun. Subsequent news reports suggest Karzai has already offered some Taliban leaders Cabinet posts when he gets formally elected. The other reason for the relatively peaceful poll, was keeping Pakistan under a tight leash.

Pakistan, which still harbors a large number of anti-American and anti-Kabul militant groups, reportedly negotiated an agreement to control the militant groups on Election Day, so that the Bush Administration will be able to use the Afghan election as a "showcase" of democracy, and thereby more credibly predict, before the U.S. Presidential elections, such an outcome in the scheduled Iraqi elections next January, as well.

There is no question that Washington considers having carried out the Afghanistan Presidential election a great success. The U.S. Commander in Afghanistan, Lt. Gen. David Barno, told a news conference that the Afghans who turned out in the millions for the Oct. 9 vote "delivered a resounding defeat to the terrorists who had sought to deny them their rightful future, and that message has been heard around the world. . . . The overwhelming success of this election is a strategic defeat for al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and is a turning point for Afghanistan and the Afghan people."

A similar statement was issued by U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, who told news persons that "the fact that this election took place in an environment remarkably free of violence is an important and untold story." The election showed that democracy was possible in Iraq, which the U.S. invaded last year, he added.



An Afghan casting his vote in the Oct. 9, 2004 Presidential election. However, because Afghanistan's "new politics" is caught up in the volatile old ethnic politics, with each of the dominant groups jockeying for position, and because opium production has soared to record levels since the U.S. military intervention, the prospects for long-term peace do not look good.

Support in the Region

Interestingly, both India and China, the two largest nations in the region, have also hailed the election as a major achievement.

India, which unofficially backed Karzai as the Presidential candidate, hailed the elections as a "historic milestone" in its journey towards peace, stability, and prosperity, and said New Delhi was looking forward to strengthening traditional ties with Kabul.

Beijing's reaction was equally positive. A *China Daily* article on Oct. 11 pointed out that Afghanistan, having endured, since the U.S. invasion in the Winter of 2001, a period only marginally better than the preceding years under the rule of the ousted Taliban regime, is now embracing a nascent democracy.

"As millions of Afghan people, especially women—once prohibited from even leaving their homes unaccompanied, let alone engaging in political activities during the reign of the Taliban—lined up at scattered polling stations on Saturday [Oct. 9] to vote for their country's new leader in the first secret ballot since the late 1960s, there was no doubt that a new page had opened for the impoverished

nation," the *China Daily* said.

Russia, on the other hand, has not indicated such confidence in the Oct. 9 poll, but it is evident that Russia wants a stable and peaceful Afghanistan. Whether such conditions can be achieved through one Presidential poll remains a question mark in Moscow's mind.

Violence Not Over

Most Afghan-watchers conclude that violence is not over, and the relatively peaceful conduct of the election cannot obliterate the fact that leading to the election, at least 44 poll workers were killed by the anti-Kabul groups. In addition, hundreds of bombs had gone off to scare the electorate in the last few months. Even on Oct. 9, security forces had prevented dozens of attacks with improvised bombs, and arrested 22 people carrying arms and explosive devices. This indicates that violence in Afghanistan is likely to continue, and all that one can say at this point is that the militant opposition to the Karzai regime failed to disrupt the landmark election.

The election may have also opened up old wounds. Ballot-counting in Afghanistan's Presidential election encountered uncalled-for delays and began on Oct. 13, as a special commission probed allegations of irregularities.

The special election commission, appointed by the joint Afghan-United Nations Electoral Management Body (JEMB), convened to evaluate complaints made by Presidential candidates, who alleged that widespread irregularities had tainted the Oct. 9 vote.

At the same time, Presidential candidates who challenged Karzai at the polls are moderating their protests over election irregularities. On Oct. 13, Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum joined other prominent Presidential challengers—including Yunous Qanooni, a leader of the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance, and the main ethnic Hazara candidate Mohammad Mohaqiq—in backing a boycott of the election results and throwing support behind the election probe.

There are also reports that in eastern and southern Afghanistan, where Taliban militia are the strongest, the local residents, many of them Pushtuns, like the bulk of the Taliban militants, had actively worked to ensure a smooth election. Reports indicate that Ambassador Khalilzad has met with major candidates asking them to withdraw their protests.

This election has also emphasized that Afghanistan's "new politics" is helplessly caught in the volatile old ethnic politics, with each of the dominant groups—Pushtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras—jockeying for position and influence in the post-elections scene. Some observers have reported negotiations in progress between Karzai and the leaders of the ousted Taliban militia. Prominent Afghan journalist Sami Yousafzai met some Taliban leaders in the eastern Paktia province, who admitted that they voted for Karzai because he was a "better enemy than those who defeated us with the help of the U.S., but now are criticizing the U.S. just to get the votes of Pushtuns."