

A Crash Course in Democracy

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Articles & Testimony

The decision by both Afghan President Hamid Karzai and his main rival, former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, to accept a runoff election is a welcome development that provides the Afghan government with an opportunity to restore its damaged credibility. The runoff election now faces two main challenges: making the process more credible and ensuring the election actually contributes to security. Setting Nov. 7 as the date for the election makes both impossible.

Nationwide elections in any country are logistically difficult. In Afghanistan, they're a nightmare. Funds need to be mobilized (the last elections cost more than \$500 million), new poll workers need to be hired (or fired), observers have to be recruited, voters reassured, and security forces redeployed. Because ballots are often transported by donkey, it could take weeks to distribute them to Afghanistan's remotest areas. A mad rush will be the only way to get all of this done, and such haste will not contribute to a credible process.

The first step in ensuring a credible election, therefore, is to postpone the date for the runoff. Only by allowing sufficient time to organize it properly can Afghans be assured that their government's interest in holding the runoff goes beyond theatrics. Given the threats the Taliban are likely to make, this point is critical. The international community cannot expect Afghans to risk their lives to participate in a sham election.

Whenever the runoff takes place, improved election-day monitoring will prove decisive to avoiding the debacle which occurred in the first round. Three elements are paramount: expanded local monitoring, a parallel vote tabulation, and international observation. Of the three, local monitoring is the most important. On the whole, Afghanistan's election officials performed admirably on the day of the election, as I saw myself in Jalalabad. Every election official I spoke with was well trained, dedicated and efficient. As I witnessed, the dual checks -- inked fingers and punched registration cards -- were sufficient to ensure voters only voted once. The counting of the ballots, while time consuming, was done professionally. The main difference between polling stations that reported credible results, therefore, and those that did not, was the presence of rival party observers.

Where security was present, huge crowds of these observers thronged polling centers, their healthy mistrust of one another guaranteeing that fraud was kept to a minimum. However, at "ghost polling sites," election stations in the insecure regions of Afghanistan which were often not even opened by poll workers, no party observers were present. This gave the local staff free reign to report fraudulent vote tallies to the advantage of whatever power broker they were aligned with -- usually President Karzai. If the second round is to yield legitimate results, ways must be found to ensure that each polling center has adequate rival candidate observers present throughout the entire process.

To further safeguard the second round, the international community should fund something called an independent parallel vote tabulation (PVT). Put simply, a PVT places a neutral observer in each of the estimated 7,000 polling centers to record the final results in each polling site after the count. The information is then communicated to a central location, either a media outlet or an international organization that runs the PVT, and announced to the country as a whole. The fact that a PVT is being conducted encourages poll workers to be more diligent in their work. There are numerous contractors the U.S. Embassy could turn to for conducting a PVT; efforts should be made immediately to start the process.

The U.S. failure to do so in the first round was too deliberate to be incompetent. In my view, U.S. officials assumed the process would be flawed but believed, like most Afghans did, that in any case Karzai would be easily re-elected. Contrary to their assumptions, a properly conducted PVT would have gone a long way to avoiding the mess that ultimately took place.

Finally, international observers should return for the second round. However, no credible effort can be mounted in two weeks. Unless more time and sufficient resources are made available, international observers are unlikely to be present, which will only add to concerns of the election's legitimacy.

Adequately safeguarding the credibility of the runoff is a necessary but insufficient condition for securing a legitimate partner in Afghanistan. If, for instance, turnout falls below the already anemic 30 percent of the first round, will Afghans believe Karzai to be any more "legitimate?" Although a lot of time has already been wasted, an election that contributes to improving security in Afghanistan might still be possible. The key will be undermining the Taliban's perceived political victory in the first round.

The Taliban's credibility should have taken a huge hit on election day. They had promised to completely disrupt the process and to cut off the fingers of anyone who voted. They did neither. Yes, a few egregious incidents of the Taliban's brutality have been reported, but clearly the Taliban threw what they had at the process and failed to disrupt it altogether.

Lamentably, this victory was achieved in part by overzealous Karzai supporters who presumably stuffed ballot boxes simply to demonstrate their loyalty and guarantee political payoff when patronage was doled out. As polls clearly indicate, however, the vast majority of Afghans do not support the Taliban. A decision not to vote, therefore, was not a vote for the Taliban, as its leadership claims. A credibly run second round could still produce a strategic defeat for the insurgency.

If, for instance, Karzai and Abdullah campaigned together occasionally and made joint public service announcements making clear a vote for either of them was a vote against the Taliban, the true choice of the election might be clarified and turnout boosted. Clear signals from the international community would also be required. Most Afghans have their finger to the wind and are unsure which way it is blowing. Is NATO committed to defeating the Taliban, or not? If not, Afghans are going to hedge their bets and stay home rather than risk the Taliban's retribution.

Ironically, therefore, the most important action Obama can take to ensure delayed elections are credibly run and produce a legitimate partner is to make the decision now, not after the results are in, to send additional troops to Afghanistan. The president's perceived indecision sends unfortunate signals of weakness to the Afghan electorate, only adding to the population's trepidation and insecurity. The administration should recognize that it is a critical political player in Afghanistan and cannot merely sit on the sidelines. Committing America's power now to the preservation of Afghan democracy is the best way to ensure the runoff produces the results the president claims to want.

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