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Afghanistan Presidential Elections 2009: The ‘Run-off’ That Never Was

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Abstract

Following 10 weeks of uncertainty after the Afghans went to the polls to elect the next president, the country’s Independent Election Commission (IEC) declared Hamid Karzai, the sitting president, as the winner. He was to face a run-off with Dr Abdullah Abdullah, the man who polled the second highest number of votes in the elections held on 20 August 2009. Initial results had Karzai winning well over one-half of the total votes cast. The results were, however, contested and, after a recount of some of the suspicious votes, Karzai’s share fell below one-half, necessitating a run-off between the two candidates winning the most votes. The run-off election was scheduled for 7 November 2009. On 1 November 2009, Dr Abdullah withdrew as a candidate leading the IEC to declare Karzai the winner. Immediately after the IEC’s announcement, the United Nations, the United States and other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries declared that they were ready to work with the new government to bring peace and development to the country that had gone through a series of civil wars since the Soviet Union sent in its troops in 1979. Would Karzai be able to win the support of the people not with the Taliban to fight the Taliban? At this point in time, most analysts would suggest that more troubles lie ahead for the country.

The Run-off Called Off

Some political scientists could have predicted this outcome even before the presidential elections were held in Afghanistan on 20 August 2009.² As Fareed Zakaria wrote in his

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² These elections were the subject of inquiry by me in four earlier ISAS Briefs. See Shahid Javed Burki, “Afghanistan Presidential Elections 2009: Developments since the fall of the Taliban”, Brief No. 123, 17 August 2009 (accessed at <http://www.isas.nus.org/events/backgroundbriefs/124.pdf>); Shahid Javed Burki, “Afghanistan Elections 2009: The Day of Reckoning”, Brief No. 126, 31 August 2009 (accessed at <http://www.isas.nus.org/events/backgroundbriefs/127.pdf>); Shahid Javed Burki, “Afghanistan Presidential Elections 2009: Inconclusive Results a Dilemma for the United States”, Brief No. 130, 22 September 2009 (accessed at <http://www.isas.nus.org/events/backgroundbriefs/1231pdf>); and Shahid Javed Burki, “Afghanistan Presidential Elections 2009: The Run-up to the Run-off”, Brief No. 134, 26 October 2009 (accessed at <http://www.isas.nus.org/events/backgroundbriefs/135.pdf>).

seminal book on the subject, it takes more than the holding of elections to politically develop a backward society.³ The results gave victory to Karzai, the sitting president, by a wide margin. The IEC gave him more than 54 percent of the total votes cast. Dr Abdullah, who had served in one of the earlier Karzai administrations as Foreign Minister, was a distant second, polling half of what the president was said to have received. However, the United Nations-managed Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) refused to validate the results. A sample survey of the contested votes was carried out and the ECC concluded that 1.3 million votes, most of them cast for Karzai, were suspect. His share was retallied and it came out at less than 50 percent while that of Dr Abdullah increased by a couple of percentage points. According to the Constitution that Karzai had piloted through a *jirga* convened for that purpose soon after his government was established, if no candidate won a clear majority in the votes cast, a run-off election would be held between the two that had received the most votes.

President Karzai initially resisted the call for a run-off declaring that the ECC had come under pressure from the United States and other NATO countries who were fighting the resurgent Taliban. These countries wanted their own man in the presidential palace and that he was too independent for their taste, he declared. The United States sent Richard Holbrooke, President Barack Obama's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, to convince Karzai to accept the finding of the ECC and order a run-off election. Holbrooke failed in his mission and Washington tried once again by dispatching Senator John Kerry to Kabul on the same mission. This time, Washington's arm twisting succeeded and Karzai ordered a run-off to be held on 7 November 2009. Dr Abdullah preferred a later date, perhaps some time in the spring of 2010. In the meantime, he suggested that a caretaker government, involving most of the major parties, should be appointed to run the country and manage the war. He also wanted the IEC – misnamed since its conduct had clearly indicated that it acted on the orders of the president – to be reconstituted. Both conditions were unacceptable to Karzai. There was, thus, another impasse.

Washington waited for the resolution of the crisis. This drama in Kabul was being played out at the same time that President Obama was carefully weighing the options he had in Afghanistan. He had not acceded to the request of General Stanley McChrystal for an additional 44,000 American troops to be sent to Afghanistan as a part of the counter-insurgency strategy he had implemented in Iraq. Instead of quickly reacting to the advice of the commander he had himself appointed, President Obama ordered a full-fledged review of America's Afghanistan strategy. He was prepared to cast aside the approach he had himself endorsed in March 2009, two months after taking office. Then, he had called the Afghan War a "war of necessity" for the United States. He now seemed less sure of that description as the American casualties mounted. October 2009 turned out to be the bloodiest month for American troops in Afghanistan when 57 soldiers lost their lives. The total toll since the invasion of the country by the Americans in October 2001 had begun to approach 1,000. This conflict had also become the longest war the United States had ever fought.

Washington was anxious to have a settled government in Kabul before it decided on the strategy it wished to pursue. It also wished that for the government to have legitimacy among the many ethnic, tribal and religious groups that made up the Afghan population. The first objective seemed within reach; the second, at best, was a more distant one. However, even

³ Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, New York, W. W. Norton, 2007.

the first objective seemed ambitious as the date for the run-off election approached. It seemed that Dr Abdullah was not prepared to bestow legitimacy on the government headed by Karzai. Several polls conducted by independent observers suggested that the president would easily triumph over his rival even if the election was free, fair and transparent. On 1 November 2009, in a speech delivered by an emotional candidate to his equally emotional followers, Dr Abdullah said that he was bowing out and no longer a candidate for the run-off election. He urged his supporters not to take to the streets to protest or boycott the political system. “But he said he could not take part in an election run-off this week that he believed would be at least as fraudulent as the badly tainted first round in August...”⁴ Karzai said in a statement released by his office that he wanted the vote to proceed as scheduled. He did not comment on his challenger’s new accusations of fraud but said, “it was Dr Abdullah’s right to choose to withdraw from the run-off election.”⁵

Dr Abdullah’s withdrawal from the race posed a constitutional and legal dilemma for the IEC. As provided in the Constitution, the IEC had gone ahead and put both Karzai and Dr Abdullah on the ballot. Legal experts believed that the election must proceed even if one of the candidates withdrew but did not formally resign. However, Dr Abdullah did not choose the option of resigning, preferring rather to withdraw and telling his supporters that it was up to them to go to the polls. He, thus, threw the ball back into the court of the IEC. The IEC acted a day after Dr Abdullah’s speech. On 2 November 2009, it cancelled the run-off election and declared Karzai the winner. Addressing a press conference in Kabul, Azizullah Ludin, Chairman of the IEC “declared the esteemed Hamid Karzai as the president...because he was the winner of the first round and the only candidate in the second round”. It was Ludin that Dr Abdullah wanted to have replaced as one of his conditions for participating in the run-off election. “The Commission’s announcement came as the United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, was making a previously unannounced visit to Afghanistan less than a week after Taliban insurgents stormed a guest house in Kabul where United Nations election workers and other employees were staying, killing five United States staff and three Afghans.”⁶

Looking Beyond

Following the announcement from Kabul, Washington reacted quickly. President Obama sent a message of congratulations to Karzai. The United States administration had come to the conclusion that Karzai would remain in control and that it had pressed him to order the run-off election in order for him to gain legitimacy. However, Dr Abdullah denied him that opportunity. In the process, he began to carve out a role for himself in Afghan politics. Looking beyond the election, Washington and other western capitals deeply involved in Afghanistan hope that the new Karzai administration would be more effective and less corrupt in governing the war-torn country. “Now, administration officials argue that Mr Karzai will have to regain that legitimacy by changing the way he governs at a moment when he is politically weaker than at any time since 2001”, wrote David E. Sanger, a respected foreign relations analyst. In addition to providing good governance, Karzai is expected to quickly raise an army that could take care of the country’s security problems without heavy American involvement. “For eight years, the United States and its allies have been struggling

⁴ Carlotta Gall and Jeff Zeleny, “Out of race, Karzai rival is harsh critic of election”, *The New York Times*, 2 November, 2009, pp. A1 and A6.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Pamela Constable and William Brangin, “Afghan election commission declares Karzai winner”, *The Washington Post*, 3 November 2009, p. A1.

to train an Afghan army; while it currently has a force of more than 90,000, American commanders put the number who can sustain themselves in a fight at closer to 50,000.”⁷

It was also reported that while reviewing the situation in Afghanistan, President Obama had asked his national security advisors to come up with an agenda they could press on the newly elected Karzai. It included making the Karzai administration more inclusive by reaching out to his political opponents including Dr Abdullah. The Afghan president will also be persuaded to dispense with the more tainted ministers in his administration and the more corrupt governors in the provinces. Also, Karzai will be asked to peel away – through the use of whatever inducements that might work – the least committed of the Taliban, at least those with no links to Al-Qaeda.

With the review of the strategy still proceeding, President Obama had begun “scaling back American ambitions. With the advice of his Defense Secretary, Robert Gates, he dropped the Bush-era talk of turning Afghanistan into a western-style democracy. He carefully avoided the word ‘victory’ which Bush had used so often. He narrowed the United States military objectives to destroying Al-Qaeda – which is thought to be based largely in Pakistan – while simply subverting the Taliban’s ability to once again take over the country.”⁸

If the Obama administration had expected that the elections of 20 August 2009 would usher in a new era in Afghanistan, that hope did not materialise. It is apparent that Afghanistan will remain work in progress for years to come.

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⁷ David E. Sanger, “Buttressing a tainted ally”, *The New York Times*, 2 November 2009, pp. A1 and A6.

⁸ Ibid.