



Congressional Testimony

AFGHAN ELECTIONS: WHAT HAPPENED AND WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

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Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for your invitation to testify on the recent elections in Afghanistan and their consequences for U.S. policy. I respectfully request that my statement be entered into the record.

ASSESSING THE AFGHAN ELECTIONS

Although international attention was dominated mainly by the presidential race in Afghanistan, it is important to remember that the 2009 Afghan elections involved polling for both the presidency—which was contested by some 40 candidates—and 420 councilors across 34 provincial councils throughout the country. This event has now become infamous for the limited participation, violence, and fraud that characterized the process. Probably less than 50 percent of the eligible electorate actually cast their ballots, and the turnout was especially low in the Taliban-dominated Pashtun southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, where fewer than 5 percent actually voted; 26 people were killed in election-day violence across Afghanistan, with voters and security forces being deliberately targeted by rocket attacks and suicide bombers; and the widespread stuffing of ballot boxes by President Hamid Karzai’s campaign, complemented by the manifest partiality of the Afghan government’s Independent Elections Commission (IEC), completed what has been the least satisfactory election since the new Afghan political dispensation was inaugurated after the Bonn Conference.

On balance, therefore, the 2009 Afghan elections were undoubtedly flawed, but they were still not an unmitigated disaster. Could they have been managed better? Certainly. But would even a better managed process have produced a fundamentally different outcome? Probably not. Although many in the United States are tempted to judge the Afghan elections by the customary standards of success in the West, that temptation ought to be resisted because of the immaturity of Afghan political institutions, the pressures imposed by a violent insurgency, and the failures of U.S. policy in Afghanistan thus far.

Two facts ought to be kept in mind in this regard: First, however extensive the fraud in the Afghan presidential elections may have been this time around, very few individuals—in Afghanistan or outside—truly believe that any of President Karzai’s competitors could have legitimately earned more votes than he did to produce a fundamentally different result than that which finally emerged. To that degree, Karzai’s reelection, despite all the shenanigans associated with that effort, broadly reflects Afghan preferences. This conclusion is, no doubt, limited by the lower participation witnessed in this election and the sharp disparities in regional turnout, but to the extent that these factors were affected by the Taliban insurgency, the broader judgment still holds.

Second, the provincial council elections, which often reflect both local concerns and local struggles over power, were successful in the sense most important to Afghanistan. As Noah Coburn and Anna Larson put it, “at least at the local level, these elections have been used to change the balance of power in a relatively peaceful manner,” thus reflecting “the highly localized cultural and social context ... that is often patronage-based and in which power is gained through constant struggle and dialogue between political groups and leaders” (Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, “Voting Together: Why Afghanistan’s 2009 Elections were (and were not) a Disaster,” *Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit*, Briefing Paper, Kabul,

November 2009). The fact that the provincial council elections have permitted peaceful transfers of power locally in a country where such a concept is unheard of suggests the successful—though slow—germination of the democratic idea, which bodes well for the future if the international community and the Afghan people are able to better prepare for the Wolesi Jirga elections scheduled for 2010.

When these two facts are considered, the 2009 Afghan elections, in my opinion, were certainly not failures, even though they would not be considered paragons of success either. Their limitations, however, do not derive simply from the malfeasance of the Karzai campaign, although this has attracted the most international attention. Rather, the weaknesses of the electoral process in Afghanistan derive more fundamentally from structural factors such as the presence of a single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system, the absence of genuine political parties, the inability to complete a national census, the fragility of electoral institutions, and the pervasive presence of corruption in all walks of life and at every level in Afghanistan. These constraints in their totality, however, are not unique to Afghanistan and, therefore, must be appreciated for what they are: limitations that are common in most developing countries.

In fact, it is a tribute to the Afghan people that their electoral experiences are not more debased than they have been, given that the country is struggling to build new national institutions and inculcate new democratic mores amid significant ethnic, tribal, economic and ideational divisions, while confronting a violent and unremitting insurgency. In such circumstances, American expectations about democratic performance in Afghanistan ought to be more realistic, taking into account its troubled history, its current predicaments, its cultural circumstances, and its early stage of economic and political reconstruction. None of this is meant to suggest that the recent electoral failures in Afghan performance should be absolved on the basis of an insidious tyranny of lowered expectations, only that these failures ought to be considered in perspective, relative to the comparable performance of other states similarly situated and Afghanistan's own unique effort at building a new democratic dispensation in the midst of the challenges of suppressing a vicious insurgency. In fact, if the primary purpose of an election is to ensure the peaceful transfer of power between individuals and groups who accept a certain political regime, then, the 2009 Afghan elections may be judged to have served that purpose, even if the process by which this objective was achieved admittedly left much to be desired. In Afghanistan's current circumstances, however, this is no mean achievement.

WHAT DO THE AFGHAN ELECTIONS IMPLY FOR THE UNITED STATES?

What do the 2009 Afghan elections imply for the United States and, in particular, for the prospects of the current American-led coalition effort in Afghanistan? These imperfect elections undoubtedly increase the burdens facing the United States in Afghanistan, but they do not make the necessity for success here less pressing nor do they render the efforts in Afghanistan, either already underway or contemplated prospectively, particularly futile.

To my mind, the objectives that President Barack Obama defined for the Afghanistan-Pakistan region in March 2009 still remain the most sensible goals for U.S. policy. These goals, as the president laid them out first on March 27, 2009 and again on August 17, 2009, consist of:

- Eviscerating al-Qaeda in Pakistan and in the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands.
- Marginalizing the Taliban as an armed opposition in Afghanistan to prevent both their return to power in Kabul and their control of Afghan territory, which would “mean an even larger safe haven from which al-Qaeda would plot to kill more Americans.”
- Preventing regional security competition over Afghanistan that would undermine the security and reconstruction efforts underway.
- Stabilizing Pakistan as a state because its fragile political system, nuclear weapons capabilities, and internal weaknesses could make it a potentially dangerous threat to American security and interests.

The importance of securing these objectives has not diminished since the president first articulated them. If anything, the imperatives for obtaining them expeditiously have only increased—for several reasons:

- First, al-Qaeda, although weakened, has not yet been destroyed and remains a serious threat to American and allied security;
- Second, although the Taliban do not by any means either physically control the majority of Afghan territory or its population, their insurgency continues to grow in strength at a time when their linkages with al-Qaeda and other dangerous affiliates such as the Haqqani network, the Hezb-i-Islami Gulbuddin, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Jaish-e-Mohammed have only deepened;
- Third, the threats to Pakistan from groups such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban – which share close links with al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban – have only become more virulent; and
- Fourth, the prospects of regional competition over Afghanistan—involving Iran, Pakistan, India, and the Central Asian republics (not to mention Russia and Saudi Arabia)—remain undiminished and could flare up again in the face of coalition failures, thus giving extremist groups like al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and their murderous affiliates a new lease on life.

The only way to conclusively defeat these multiple changes is to aid the Afghan people in erecting a minimally effective state that can control its national territory and deliver the personal security, responsive governance, and economic development necessary to ensure internal stability. No other alternative, including an exclusive focus on counterterrorism, or returning to acephalous tribalism, or accommodating fundamentalists within the governing regime, or accepting an authoritarian dispensation, can actually produce an Afghanistan that does not generate threats to itself, its neighbors, and the United States and its allies. An extensive elaboration of this conclusion can be found in my report, *Reconciling with the*

Taliban? Towards an Alternative Grand Strategy in Afghanistan (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009), 21-34.

Given this judgment, the only question to my mind is how best the United States and its allies can attain the goal of creating, what the former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Ronald E. Neumann, once labeled, “a somewhat cohesive state in Afghanistan.” Since the ability of the U.S.-led coalition to defeat al-Qaeda and its affiliates, including the Taliban, hinges *fundamentally* on its success here, the best instrument for achieving this goal today remains a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy focused on protecting the Afghan population—exactly the strategy articulated by General Stanley McChrystal. The success of this strategy, in turn, hinges on how well we can effect a variety of strategic, operational, domestic, and external changes. These alterations have been detailed at length in *Reconciling with the Taliban?* and, hence, I will restrict my remarks here mainly to what is the central subject of this hearing: How can the United States work with Hamid Karzai to effect the critical domestic changes necessary for success in the aftermath of the flawed August 2009 elections in Afghanistan?

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? OR, HOW CAN THE UNITED STATES STILL WORK WITH HAMID KARZAI?

It is by now widely recognized that effective Afghan government performance will be the essential complement to U.S. troop reinforcement if the momentum of the Taliban insurgency is to be first arrested and eventually defeated. In fact, there is almost universal agreement within Afghanistan and abroad that Karzai’s failures of governance have contributed immensely to the resurgence of the insurgency. This troubling fact was well understood by the Obama administration prior to the August elections and, unfortunately, its fraught relationship with the Afghan president may have inadvertently contributed to the problems associated with his reelection. Clearly, the decision by the Karzai campaign to engage in illegalities like ballot stuffing, voter intimidation, and other forms of electoral fraud was conditioned largely by the expectation that his support base, which consists primarily of Pashtuns, would be unable to exercise their suffrage because of successful Taliban intimidation. Accordingly, he attempted to compensate for this loss by making deals with various allied warlords to deliver the necessary votes that would increase the prospects of his reelection.

But his fraying ties with the United States also reinforced his determination to win at any cost. When Karzai arrived in Washington in May this year, there were many within the Obama administration who believed that Afghan and coalition interests would be better served if he were to either relinquish the idea of running for reelection or accept titular status if reelected by appointing another more competent administrator to oversee day-to-day governance. The speculation about these alternatives, however, appeared to have strengthened his suspicions that the United States was determined to force his removal from power and, consequently, increased his incentives to produce a guaranteed electoral victory by any means.

With Dr. Abdullah Abdullah’s decision not to contest the runoff, Hamid Karzai has now secured a second term by default. The real question at this juncture, therefore, is how should

the United States move forward in the aftermath of this flawed outcome? Five distinct elements, *at the level of process*, should be considered as part of an integrated policy.

First, the administration should simply accept the fact that Hamid Karzai will enjoy a second term as president of Afghanistan. To be sure, his credibility has been damaged and his political capacity weakened, among other things, because of his potential obligations to the warlords who supported him during the campaign. But, with Dr. Abdullah's decision to refrain from challenging Karzai, the United States has no choice but to accept him as Afghanistan's principal representative—and to work with him for a better second term because that is fundamentally in American interests. His diminished legitimacy should not be treated as an insurmountable obstacle to cooperation because while political legitimacy no doubt matters, most Afghans care more about Karzai's performance in regards to governance than any abstract concerns about legitimacy. A successful counterinsurgency campaign too requires only the most minimalist form of legitimacy: all it requires is that the population supports the regime more than it supports the insurgents and such backing invariably derives more from the gains received than any judgment about leadership rectitude. In this context, helping Karzai deal with the absence of human security and the pervasive corruption in Afghanistan will make a larger difference to his success as a coalition partner than any doubts about his legitimacy. Where defeating the insurgency is concerned as well, redressing the lack of security and the prevalence of petty corruption is probably more important to most Afghans than combating grand larceny—and this effort requires more than simply admonishing Karzai to do a better job. It requires the coalition to address the difficult issues of Afghan state resources, the strength of the Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund, and the pay scales of public servants, rather than merely exhorting the Afghan government to provide law and order while fighting dishonesty and sleaze within the country.

Second, President Obama and his administration must commit clearly and resolutely to winning the war in Afghanistan and staying involved in the country over the long term. Both components of this commitment are essential. An unmistakable communication of the U.S. intention to seek victory—corroborated by committing the necessary resources to the task—is fundamentally necessary to undermine the hedging strategies currently pursued by various critical actors inside Afghanistan. The recent statement made by the White House spokesman, Robert Gibbs, that “an exit strategy is as important as ramping up troops” for success in Afghanistan, is singularly unhelpful. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's assertion that that United States has “no long-term stake” in Afghanistan, although not intended to mean what it apparently says, could prove similarly problematic. The simple fact of the matter is that any evidence of American vacillation or a longing desire for a quick exit makes the task of procuring success in Afghanistan all the harder. Entertaining the notion of exit strategy is particularly dangerous because: it spurs the insurgents to simply wait out the international coalition; it encourages important Afghan bystanders such as the village elders and tribal chiefs, whose cooperation is necessary to defeat the Taliban, to persist in their prevailing ambivalence because the coalition's presence is assessed as transient and hence unworthy of backing; it induces Islamabad to continue supporting the Afghan Taliban leadership because of its expectation that the insurgents may once again be required to protect Pakistan's interests in the regional security competition that will ensue after the United States departs Afghanistan; and, above all else in the present context, it reduces Karzai's incentives to make the difficult political decisions he must with respect to

improving governance—some of which would reduce his own power—if he is not assured of consistent American support for his regime and for him personally. Encouraging Karzai to confront various national problems with alacrity, therefore, will be impossible in the absence of a genuine and lasting U.S. commitment to Afghanistan.

Third, the Obama administration must rebuild the partnership with Hamid Karzai. Karzai's flaws are legion: he is a poor manager; he lacks attention to detail; he is terrible at policy implementation. But he has a vision for Afghanistan as a successful and moderate state, which is identical to that sought by the international community. Although Karzai can often be erratic in his decision making and uncomfortable with managing dilemmas, the historical record suggests that he has in fact implemented many difficult decisions when he has been shown their necessity or their advantage. In most cases, what appears to have made the difference has been the presence of American interlocutors he had come to trust. In the first term of the Bush administration, then U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad, turned out to be one such confidant. A more recent example of an individual who played such a role has been Senator John Kerry whose patient and sympathetic diplomacy was critical to convincing Karzai to accept a runoff and thereby resolve the crisis caused by the disputed election of August 2009. It is indeed unfortunate that Karzai today appears to lack the trusted interlocutor of the kind exemplified by Khalilzad and Kerry. But finding someone within the administration who can play a similar role will be critical if the Afghan president is to be nudged into “doing the right thing” in the years ahead—something that will be essential for American success as well. In this context, the Obama administration should restrain its propensity to relentlessly blame Karzai for all of Afghanistan's present ills. While he undoubtedly shares blame, Afghanistan's problems derive fundamentally from deeper factors, including the effects of over thirty years of savage war, the destruction of its political institutions and its social fabric thanks to conflict, and the meager and disjointed assistance offered by the international community. The unyielding administration criticism of Karzai, at the very least therefore, ought to be moderated by a recognition of the terrible circumstances facing his government.

Fourth, working with Karzai and in Afghanistan more generally will require a strong American civil-military partnership in Kabul. The counterinsurgency campaign that will be waged in some form in the months and years ahead will require a close partnership between uniformed military officers overseeing the business of war, diplomats charged with strengthening relations with the host country as well as with other coalition partners, and officials involved in reconstruction and development. Success in Afghanistan will materialize only to the degree that all three sets of activities are integrated at all levels in a unified political-military campaign. In the early years in Afghanistan, such a robust and coherent civil-military partnership was personified by the close collaboration between Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and the commander of the Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan (CFC-A), Lieutenant General David W. Barno. A more recent example where a similar partnership was indispensable for success can be found in Iraq between Ambassador Ryan Crocker and General David Petraeus. Without such close affinity between the civilian and military arms of the U.S.-led coalition effort in Afghanistan, success will prove to be elusive.

Fifth, a “whole of government” effort within the United States will be vital for the success of the campaign in Afghanistan. Although the appointment of Ambassador Richard Holbrooke as the President's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan appears to have

brought much more coherence to the U.S. government's political and diplomatic efforts, it is still not clear whether the coordination between the White House staff and the Special Representative's office in the State Department is particularly effective. Even more consequentially, it does not appear as if the President himself has been able to devote the requisite time and attention to the war in Afghanistan. By all accounts, President Obama seems to have permitted his administration's handling of the Afghan mission to proceed on autopilot—until the point when General Stanley McChrystal's request for more troops jolted his attention. In retrospect, it is not at all clear, for example, how involved President Obama was in assessing the strategic alternatives facing the United States before promulgating the national strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan announced in March 2009. A deeper presidential understanding of the consequences of the strategy then would have spared the country, its military commanders, American allies, and the regional states in South Asia (including Afghanistan), the uncertainty now associated with committing the required resources in Afghanistan. As the administration moves forward to implement its preferred course of action in the months ahead, another lapse in leadership attention in Washington could prove exceedingly costly.

CONCLUSION

The minimal improvements in process suggested above remain necessary but not sufficient for effecting the domestic changes in Afghanistan that will be required for American success in that country. These improvements must therefore be complemented, obviously, by equally important shifts at the level of policy, which have been detailed at length in *Reconciling with the Taliban?* Suffice it to say that the most important reforms necessary at the domestic level may turn out to be relatively small things that could make all the difference. For example, the United States ought to increase its investment in mentoring the Government of Afghanistan's ministerial offices because, for the foreseeable future, these institutions will remain the principal instruments for delivering services nationwide. Similarly, working with Karzai to identify and appoint effective district governors could make all the difference to increasing popular support for the state during the ongoing insurgency—in fact, the possibilities of success here may hinge largely on the presence of “a few good men” in Afghanistan. Finally, a general reorientation in attention from central bodies to the sub-national institutions of political and social order and economic development is long overdue.

Above all else, however, securing productive domestic change in Afghanistan will require a sturdy American recommitment to the Afghan cause—a dedication that has been called into question because of the involved nature of recent administration debates about future U.S. strategy. The flawed presidential election in Afghanistan should not become a reason for wavering American investment in this war torn country because, whatever its flaws, the electoral outcome broadly comports with Afghan preferences. Accordingly, the administration should use the opportunity offered by its review of General McChrystal's recommendations to demonstrate strong support for the general's strategy because it remains the best instrument available for securing American interests in Afghanistan during Karzai's second term as president.