



Afghanistan Parliamentary Elections Strengthening Democracy?

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October Elections: Political Backgrounder

As Afghanistan gears up for the upcoming Parliamentary [Wolesi Jirga/House of People] elections on October 20 this year for 249 seats, there are evident signs of deepening political contestations in the country. The first important issue that draws the attention towards this is the arbitrary disqualification of candidates, including a few serving Member of Parliament's (MPs), suspected to have links with armed groups by the Independent Election Commission (IEC) on August 11, 2018. Triggering a political turmoil, this resulted in a backlash from the barred candidates, who organised sit-in protests in tents outside the office of IEC in Kabul, which were later dispersed by the security forces.

Secondly and more recently, the resignations of four important Cabinet Ministers on August 25, 2018, marked an inflection point in the larger political scenario of the country. Of the four resignations, President Ghani rejected resignations of three officials, Minister of National Defense Tareq Shah Bahrami, Minister of Interior Wais Ahmad Barmak, and high-ranking intelligence official, Masoum Stanekzai., asking them to continue in their posts. However, the President accepted the resignation of the National Security Adviser (NSA), Mohamad Hanif Atmar, who was the first to resign on grounds of "serious differences" with the top leadership of the government "over policies and principles."

Clearly, a result of the growing political contestation, Atmar's resignation led to the appointment of Hamdullah Mohib as the new NSA. Mohib, who is an old political aide of Ashraf Ghani, was the former Afghan Ambassador to Washington (September 2015-In office) and had also served as Ghani's Deputy Chief of Staff soon after he assumed the Presidential office in 2014. While Atmar's unexpected stepping down has obvious political overtones, there are also deep and

serious concerns about the current security situation in the country and the ongoing peace process, which appears to be elusive. Significantly, Atmar had articulated his inability to resolve his differences with the leadership on issues of “strengthening national unity, restoring peace and security, elections and good governance”² in addition to strengthening regional and international relations.

The political churning inside the Presidential Palace and the IEC over the last two weeks have dual implications – first, it has an immediate impact on the forthcoming parliamentary elections in October; and second, it bears larger implications for the democratic process in the country. In this perspective, it is useful to trace the historical evolution of the process of democratisation in Afghanistan through an analysis of its parliamentary elections.

Parliamentary Elections: A turbulent history?

The UN-mediated Bonn Agreement of 2001, following the fall of Taliban, had laid down simultaneous elections for both the President and the Parliament. While the first Presidential elections were held in October 2004, the Parliamentary elections were delayed by one year, and held in September 2005. This marked a significant transition in Afghan politics from an unrepresentative interim government to a fully elected government.³ However, prior to the fall of Taliban, the country had witnessed two parliamentary elections in the 1960s that were hailed as “New Democracy.”⁴

In 1964, Muhammad Zahir Shah introduced the new Constitution, which replaced the 1931 Constitution and formally established open democratic elections, along with a bicameral Parliament. It was under him that universal suffrage, including women’s right to vote, was introduced. Following the establishment of the bicameral Parliament, the first and second parliamentary elections were held in 1965 and 1969, which were considered to be “relatively free.” Following the two successful parliamentary elections, the former Prime Minister Daud Khan overthrew the monarchy in a coup in 1973 and established the Republic of Afghanistan. The dissolution of the Parliament led to political dissension and schisms within an already fractured polity.⁵

Parliamentary elections resumed only in post-Bonn period, after the fall of the Taliban in October 2001. Since then, the forthcoming elections in October will be the third parliamentary polls to be conducted after the two successful elections of 2005 and 2010 that helped Afghanistan in gradually becoming a struggling, yet functioning democracy. The third election was scheduled to be held in 2015 but has been repeatedly postponed - once to October 15, 2016 and then to July 7, 2018 – due to political disputes and disagreements over voter registration.

Post-Bonn Politics: lingering Irritants

Despite the democratic successes achieved in previous elections, there remain serious challenges. Firstly, in terms of long-pending reforms in the electoral system and secondly, increasing security threats from non-state actors. Moreover, the IEC has delayed the first-ever District Council elections that were to be held along with parliamentary elections in October to April 2019 and has also stalemated Ghazni elections, owing to the recent Taliban offensive, under the provision of Part I of Article 104 in the Election Law.⁶

The three years delay in October elections is due to the impending reforms in the electoral system. In an attempt to broaden the decision-making spectrum of the Wolesi Jirga⁷ the political class in the country has been clearly divided on the issue of current electoral system. A group of 21 influential political parties⁸ had called for changing the Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) system to Multi-Dimensional Representation (MDR), which would allow political parties to have greater role in the elections, including “an observation room within the IEC to observe preparations for the elections.”⁹ While under the SNTV system, voters select a candidate rather than a party, the MDR system allows parties to field party-based candidates list and votes cast for these lists would be transferable in each constituency in order to “prevent wastage of people’s votes.”¹⁰ The timing of this proposal was found unsuitable by the IEC as it would impact the preparation of the upcoming elections. While reforms may be necessary, given the unresponsive nature of the SNTV that leads to “wastage of a substantial percentage of votes,” it must be noted that a change in the electoral system would be a radical change and will require a wider national debate, which is a time consuming process.

As the debate on electoral reforms continues, the momentum for the October elections is possibly movement in the right direction. There are, however, persistent challenges of insecurity posed by the Taliban and multiplicity of colluding non-state actors and terrorist formations operating in the country. While the voter registration has been completed, the bigger challenge lies in ensuring public safety and conducting of free and fair elections, which would signify that the country is moving towards a strengthening of democracy that is at its nascent stage.

Notably, this year the voter registration was carried out in three phases: the first phase was from April 14 to May 13, followed by the second phase from May 15 to 28, and lastly, the third phase from May 30 to June 12. According to the IED, 9,072,208 voters have been registered for this year’s parliamentary elections. Of these, 5,783,037 (63.7 per cent) are men, 3,114,942 (34.3 per cent) are women. 583 (0.006 per cent) voter registration was recorded for religious minorities (Hindus and Sikhs); and 173,646 (1.9 per cent) for Kuchi (nomads). The final verification and approval of the voters list is still to be done by the IEC that has entered the details of 3.5 million registered voters in their central database.¹¹

Conclusion: Troubled Future Ahead?

A history of the parliamentary elections in Afghanistan brings the focus on its turbulent past that has been mired in ethnic faultlines, political rivalry, electoral controversies and charges of acute corruption. Put together, these issues not only create space for radicalisation and violent extremism but also pose a challenge to democratic stability and political legitimacy in the long run. The future of sustainable democracy lies in effective political governance and strengthening of the rule of law - that emphasises on the promotion of justice and human development consistent with human rights principles. However, Afghanistan has seen poor governance, which perpetuated conflict and violence in the country.

The upcoming elections lie hostage to the Taliban that seems to be on an upward march since reports emerged on the group gaining ground in early 2018.¹² In fact, the voter registration period witnessed a series of terror attacks, targeting civilians in polling stations. Significantly, a total of 271 civilian casualties were recorded in 23 election-related security incidents during the voter registration period¹³, starting from April 14 until the release of UNAMA report on May 10, 2018. It shows that the government has limitations in ensuring public security.

In this background of insecurity and disarray, it becomes increasingly clear that the factors that limit the accomplishments of parliamentary electoral politics - that is - deepening democracy - also bedevil economic and social stability.

As stated above, the string of terrorist attacks on voter registration centres across the country this year threaten the security of voters at the polling stations in the upcoming elections in October. Given this background of mounting insecurity in the country and an unstable political landscape, a pall of fear has gripped the Afghan electorate. In this context of intimidation¹⁴ and insecurity, can we expect a large voter turnout in the Wolesi Jirga elections? Afghanistan surely is being put to the test.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

Endnotes

¹ Susannah Cullinane & Jennifer Hauser, Afghan national security adviser quits. Resignations of 3 other officials rejected, *CNN*, August 26, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/08/26/asia/afghanistan-national-security-adviser-resigns/index.html>, accessed on August 27, 2018

² Ayaz Gul, Top Afghan Security Adviser Abruptly Quits, *Voice of America*, August 25, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/top-afghan-security-adviser-abruptly-quits/4544202.html>, accessed on August 28, 2018

³ The “UN Talks on Afghanistan”, popularly known as Bonn Agreement, established an interim administration to govern for six months in 2002 and administer the distribution of aid in the country. In June that year, the interim administration convened a

Loya Jirga (grand council) of tribal elders and other important figures, including Zahir Shah, who presided over the meeting. The *Loya Jirga* elected a transitional authority to govern until the elections of 2004 that would be a representative government. The *Loya Jirga* selected Hamid Karzai as the interim President of Afghanistan, who later appointed a cabinet to lead the Afghan Transitional Administration (ATA) [See NDI, 2010 Election Observer, p. 8].

⁴ The 2010 Wolesi Jirga Elections, *National Democratic Institute for International Affairs* (NDI), 2010, p. 10

⁵ The Saur Revolution of 1978 led the Peoples' Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) take power with Nur Muhammad Taraki as the President. Soon after assuming power, intra-party strife deposed Taraki, who was assassinated in October 1979 and Hafizullah Amin became the President of the country for a period of three months. In December 1979, Amin was assassinated, and Babrak Karmal was installed as the President by the Soviets. New Constitution was drafted in 1985 and local elections in government-controlled areas of Kabul were held. In 1987, Muhammad Najibullah became the President and ratified the Constitution, which included a Parliament elected by popular vote. The following year, in 1988, elections were held in government-controlled areas. The Russians withdrew in 1989 and Najibullah stepped down in 1992, resulting in civil war that led to his death and Taliban's overtake of Kabul in 1996.

⁶ Manssour Ansar, Watchdogs Predict Deadlock Around Afghanistan's Elections, *Tolo News*, September 3, 2018, <https://www.tolonews.com/elections-2018/watchdogs-predict-deadlock-around-afghanistan%E2%80%99s-elections>, accessed on September 4, 2018

⁷ **The Wolesi Jirga or the House of People (Lower House) is a part of the legislative branch of the bicameral National Assembly, which also consists of the Meshrano Jirga or the House of Elders (Upper House). Consisting of 249 seats, the members of Wolesi Jirga are directly elected by the people of Afghanistan for five years term. The number of seat is proportional to the population of the province. The Wolesi Jirga is primarily engaged with the responsibility to make and pass laws. It can endorse and enforce a Bill not approved by the President with a two-thirds majority. It takes decision on the interpellation of Ministers and approves/rejects appointments, according to the Constitution. The Wolesi shall set up Special Commission to review and investigate government functions/actions. It takes decisions about government's development programme and government's annual budget.** [See, UN Fact Sheet, Wolesi Jirga,

http://www.iec.org.af/jemb.org/eng/electoral_system/wolesi_jirga_fa.pdf]

⁸ Some major parties include, Jama'at-e-Islami, which is predominantly Tajik, Both factions of Pashtun-dominated Hezb-e-Islami, Uzbek Jumbish-e-Melli Islami and two factions of Hazara-dominated Hezb-e-Wahdat.

⁹ Ali Yawar Adili, Afghanistan Election Conundrum (11):Electoral Reform and Preparations for the 2018 Elections, *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, p. 3

¹⁰ Ali Yawar Adili, Afghanistan Election Conundrum (5): A late demand to change the electoral system, *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, p. 3

¹¹Op Cit, Election Conundrum (11) , p. 2

¹² A BBC Report early this year (January 31, 2018) identified 70 per cent of Afghanistan under Taliban control. According to the study, the Taliban have pushed beyond their traditional southern stronghold and have made encroachments into eastern, western and northern parts of the country. (BBC, Shoaib Sharifi & Louise Adamou, January 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42863116>)

¹³ Election-Related Attacks and Abuses during the Initial Voter Registration Period, *UNAMA*, May 10, 2018, p. 1

¹⁴ On April 27, 2018, the Taliban Shadow District Governor in Dar-e-Suf district of Samangan province threatened to chop off the fingers of any member of the community who had a voter registration card, worked for the IEC or participated in the upcoming parliamentary elections. Similar incidents were reported in other provinces like Laghman, Paktika, Kunduz and others [UNAMA, May 2018].