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Why Vote in 2014? Afghan Views of the Elections

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SUMMARY POINTS

- A surprising number of urban Afghans are planning to vote in the elections on 5 April, despite recent attacks on electoral officials, the threat of more general violence, the precedent set for widespread electoral fraud in 2009, suspected backroom deals between elites and rumours of international meddling.
- Further, an overwhelming majority of those interviewed in a Chatham House-sponsored project suggested there was no alternative to elections as a means to transfer power, indicating that international support for the electoral process is welcome and necessary.
- However, participation is less about an embrace of democratic practice or the policy platforms of different candidates than about wanting a peaceful handover of power and a secure rather than violent future.
- To this end, reasons for voting are not so much about choosing the *kind* of government that people want to see established, but instead to ensure that a government of sorts *is* established. The reasons include religious and/or moral duty; needing to counter fraudulent votes with 'real' ones; needing to convince elites that elections are the only means of transferring power from one president to the next; making a stand against Taliban attempts to disrupt the process; and demonstrating the size of the candidates' support bases.
- These elections are also seen as a harbinger of the country's political trajectory over the medium term. Whether parliamentary elections occur in 2015 very much depends on what happens this year.
- Much speculation, both positive and negative, exists about the role of international actors, with rumours of international interference in the outcome countered by a widespread desire for an international presence at the polling stations and in the medium to long term through the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA). This potential mandate for assistance is encouraging, but must be considered carefully if it is to lead to a productive relationship between the new Afghan government and the international community.
- For the Taliban, the elections will involve a show of strength to disrupt the process as far as possible, without going so far as to lose credibility among the members of Afghan society whose support they have won.

INTRODUCTION

This paper, the first of three on voter perceptions in the Afghan elections in a project sponsored by Chatham House, is intended to provide insights into how a select group of Afghans is reacting to the elections in urban areas where campaigning is in full swing. It is based upon ongoing research and data being collected in the weeks leading up to the elections by experienced Afghan researchers. Respondents include a broad sample of potential voters, young and old, literate and illiterate, male and female, from a range of occupations, ethnic groups and backgrounds.

Afghans could be excused for lacking interest in the forthcoming poll. Combining election-related violence, widely anticipated fraud, deal-making and interference from outside, these elections are unlikely to go smoothly. Yet most of those interviewed are preparing for 5 April with considerable enthusiasm.

This is because the elections in April represent more than just a vote: they are a small but symbolic part of what is to be a much broader political transition that will involve a quasi-theatrical show of strength from influential actors and their support groups on all sides.

For the Taliban, this show of strength will involve disrupting the process as far as possible without completely alienating those members of Afghan society whose support they have won; for President Hamid Karzai and his team, it will translate into the mobilization of as many government resources as possible to consolidate the Pashtun vote (most likely behind Zalmay Rasoul); for other candidates, it will be a race to see who can generate the most inclusive, extensive vote bank to either win outright or exchange for influence with the winning candidate later on; and for many voters, it is an opportunity to demonstrate political muscle, secure economic resources (either legally or illegally) and make a statement to would-be-spoilers (including the Taliban) about the future of the country. Thus while the lives of ordinary Afghans are unlikely to change much, regardless of who actually wins the presidential race, the way in which power is divided could have a profound impact on existing patronage networks and structures. It is in every group's interest to be represented to the greatest extent possible.

Provincial council elections, also to be held on 5 April, may appear insignificant in comparison with the presidential race – and yet people are still planning to vote, albeit for different reasons. While many provincial councils remain weak and financially impotent, having a representative of one's district or area sitting on such a body makes administrative tasks, such as applying

for a driver's licence or passport, much easier. What is important and indicative, however, is that Afghan voters are thinking about these issues alongside the macro-concerns of who will run the state – because these are the issues that will affect people's day-to-day lives. And if there is general concern about the nature of day-to-day transactions and administrative tasks, then there is some hope that people consider civil war still a fairly distant prospect. This is why provincial council elections deserve more attention than they are currently receiving.

Why vote? Duty, stability, looking to the future and securing resources

In view of the widespread anticipation of fraud in the polls, a few respondents in interviews declared their intention to refrain from voting. These opinions, however, were uncommon, with most prospective voters interviewed still keen to participate in the elections. For some, reasons to vote include religious or moral duty (also used as reasons not to vote for an undeserving candidate), while others talked about the responsibility of individuals and groups to counter the fraudulent votes with as many 'real' ones as possible. This indicates that there is some hope that the electoral process will not be 'fraudulent enough' to delegitimize the process, although what would constitute 'acceptable levels' of fraud were not readily discussed by respondents.¹

Yet others mentioned the lack of an alternative means to effect the transition between presidents, and the need to convince elites that elections were the only way in which this transition could be legitimately achieved. According to one respondent, 'elections are the only way to convince elites not to make noise and insecurity'. Interestingly, whereas in 2009 talk of convening Loya Jirgas to replace elections as a means to transfer power was relatively common, even if dismissed by the urban elite, it was not raised by any of the respondents for this study. Alongside convincing elites, there is a general perception that voting can help demonstrate the validity of elections to would-be spoilers such as the Taliban, and to counter their attempts to disrupt the process. Urban Afghans are convinced that the election must go ahead.

¹ For more discussion on the need to define 'acceptable' levels of fraud on Afghan terms, see Carina Perelli and Scott Smith (2014), *Anticipating and Responding to Fraud in the 2014 Afghan Elections*, Chatham House Briefing Paper, 'Afghanistan: Opportunities in Crisis' Series No. 2.

These reasons for voting given by respondents suggest that there is a much bigger picture behind the elections than the simple question of who wins. As one man explained,

In the current situation, who wins and who loses is not important for me. The important thing is to have a successful election and a legitimate government in Afghanistan to be acceptable for all people, otherwise we are headed towards a dictatorship or civil war as we have experienced before. Thus ... even though I know there will be corruption and fraud, I hope we will reform our mistakes and have free elections in the future.

Over and above the desire for their chosen candidate to win, the principal concern expressed by respondents was that the outcome of elections should help to secure Afghanistan's short- to medium-term future in such a way as to prevent government collapse. They were also keen to ensure that the international community should still be within reach in case of a crisis – mainly expressed through concerns that the BSA is signed as soon as possible. The importance of the BSA was strikingly prevalent across all interviews and all urban communities interviewed – demonstrating the extent to which the elections and the wider political landscape are interrelated and the polls are part of a much bigger process than simply a counting of ballots.² Voters also clearly felt that the international community had a role in overseeing, monitoring and supporting the elections, and that its presence could help smooth the transition and potentially help avoid civil war.³

Voting in the provincial council elections was described by respondents as a different but connected process, with most confirming that they would be participating in both elections but for different reasons. Respondents were under no illusions about the potential power and influence of the provincial councils, which is limited at best, but here it was more about ensuring that a relative or close associate had some connection to government resources that could be drawn upon in future if necessary.

² For an analysis of this in the 2009 and 2010 elections, see Coburn and Larson (2014), *Derailing Democracy in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press).

³ Since research for this piece was done primarily in Kabul and Nangarhar, it would be unsurprising if attitudes were more negative in areas that experienced a more prominent international military presence over the past decade.

Case study: Provincial council elections in Dasht-e Barchi

According to respondents in the Hazara communities in Dasht-e Barchi, to the west of Kabul, provincial council elections are primarily about securing a local, familiar representative on the council, with community voting blocs organizing around districts of origin in Ghazni, Bamiyan or Maidan Wardak. In the month before the election, these communities were in the process of narrowing down their candidates to one individual, for whom 800–1,000 families would reportedly cast their votes. This technique appears to be specific to Hazara communities in Dasht-e Barchi, however, whose social organization around places of origin coincides neatly with the rough number of votes it would take to win an election. This could also go some way to explaining the success of the Kabuli Hazaras in the 2009 provincial council elections. Other communities across Kabul appear less organized collectively around these polls, although respondents from other locations still saw voting for a particular candidate as a way to secure personal connections to a government body.

Views of the presidential candidates

Respondents' discussions of the candidates were frank: some were classed as warlords, some as allying with warlords, and some were considered completely incompetent. When discussing their various qualities, however, policy platforms were not mentioned at all, in spite of the way in which candidates have been pushed to talk about these on recent televised debates. This is important because it highlights how participation in these elections is not really about selecting the *kind* of government that will replace the Karzai administration, but rather about trying to ensure that at least *some* kind of government comes to power. It is easy to forget that this will be the first time in Afghanistan's history that a transition from one regime to another

has been attempted through the ballot box. The question of the extent to which Karzai would put pressure on the remaining candidates to promote his assumed favourite, Zalmay Rasoul, was also a key issue – with government meddling expected (through illegitimate resource allocation to the campaigns of certain candidates, for example).

Throughout the interviews there was also a clear concern about the entire presidential ticket – not only the presidential candidate but his vice-presidential choices also. Several respondents questioned Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai's choice of running mate, Abdul Rashid Dostum, and indicated that their votes would be cast elsewhere as a result, owing to his dark reputation as a warlord. Others, however, merely expressed the hope that Ghani would be able to keep this 'wild man' in check. The fact that all of the major candidates appeared to take seriously the notion of ethnically balancing their tickets was applauded by many respondents, particularly those from the smaller minority groups.

Clearly, for those interviewed, it matters who wins when it comes to the potential representation of minorities, and the perceived way in which different groups in the country (including Karzai and his supporters, and the Taliban) react to the outcome. But both of these issues are essentially about security over the medium term. Whoever can provide that, in a way acceptable to most groups, will be a legitimate winner. And thus in some senses it does not matter which of the personalities competing actually wins. As one respondent remarked: 'The current situation will remain the same after the election. Only the president will be changed but everything else will remain the same.' Economically and politically speaking, the likely effects of the change in leadership will have little bearing on the lives of ordinary Afghans.

LOOKING AHEAD: WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Few respondents felt that the polls on 5 April are likely to be transparent, peaceful and anywhere close to free of fraud. Despite this, it is clear that many Afghan voters in urban areas see this as an important political step for the country. The transition from Karzai to his successor is likely to be rocky and disputed, but Afghans have embraced elections as the means for making this transition, in spite of the many flaws in the process. Looking forward, voting for parliamentary members in 2015 and beyond has the potential to help further establish a widely accessible public role in political transition – again, a relatively new phenomenon in Afghanistan. It is also clear that there is still a role for the international community within these processes. **While concerns about meddling remain, many feel that the international community can contribute usefully by providing oversight during the forthcoming transition and by committing to support the country's new government from the wings as it establishes itself.** Playing this role carefully could do much to encourage longer-term democratization in Afghanistan.

To this end, the following comments and suggestions are offered.

- Despite threats against them, the international community needs to continue to monitor these elections and support Afghan electoral officials as far as possible.
- International efforts to support these elections should be framed in such a way that long-term democratization is emphasized, for example by voicing support for the provincial council polls too and committing to monitor the 2015 parliamentary elections.
- International actors need to consider the reasons why Afghans are voting and understand these as part of the bigger political transition, rather than simply as a choice of an individual leader. This broader view will help to the international community avoid getting caught up in side-issues that deflect attention from the key priority of establishing a new, legitimate government.
- While the elections are bound to be corrupt and disputed, the international community needs to avoid knee-jerk reactions and offer its services as a potential mediator while Afghan officials navigate the solutions themselves.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Anna Larson is a researcher affiliated with the University of York working on elections, democratization and local governance in fragile states. She worked in Afghanistan between 2004 and 2010, most recently leading research programmes in governance for the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU). She is the co-author with Noah Coburn of *Derailing Democracy in Afghanistan* (Columbia, 2014), an analysis of Afghanistan's 2009 and 2010 elections and their repercussions.

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