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### Background

Modern Afghan political history has witnessed a series of violent power struggles, bloody coups, assassinations and unstable transfers of authority. The various forms of government over the past 50 years have included a monarchy, varieties of socialism, a communist state, and a theocracy. Although many officials of these previous regimes still play a role in Afghan politics, a very large number – including several heads of state – died violently in the various upheavals. The Afghan government has now been restructured as an Islamic republic consisting of three branches of power – executive, legislative and judiciary – with powers and responsibilities clearly delineated in a new Constitution. Elected in 2004, Hamid Karzai is now the President of Afghanistan, and a Parliament and Provincial Councils were elected by popular vote in 2005.

The next Afghan elections are scheduled to be held in 2009 (Presidential) and 2010 (Parliamentary), but present conditions in Afghanistan will make the logistics and feasibility of holding any elections problematic. The upcoming elections are essential to the country's continuing political development, serving as a major step in the peaceful transmission of power. Unfortunately, domestic and regional insecurity, pervasive corruption, the future willingness of international partners to assist in financing the effort, and serious disagreement over timing are all factors that impact on the feasibility of holding elections in the country. While none of these factors in and of themselves is sufficient to prevent the upcoming elections, taken in combination they present a formidable challenge.

During the Bonn Conference in December 2001, Hamid Karzai was selected as head of the Afghan Interim Authority through meetings and negotiations held by a limited number of Afghan warlords and émigré politicians, United States government (USG) representatives, the United Nations (UN) and various international partners. It was very much a closed-door process, and there was no consultation with the Afghan populace *per se*. This was followed in the spring of 2002 by the selection of representatives from around the country to attend the Emergency *Loya Jirga* (a national consultative assembly).

Held under UN auspices, the selection was as much social as political, and a sometimes chaotic affair, because the concept of popular selection of representatives was a new one for most people. In one such event in Kunduz Province, for example, this author was watching a melee of local men (there were no female participants) who had been asked to elect a representative from their area. An elderly resident approached him and began to apologize for the seeming chaos, noting that over the

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past decades, the Communists, the *mujaheddin* and the Taliban had all forbidden such large groups to gather together. “I haven’t been in a group like this in more than twenty years”, he said, adding that “We don’t know how to talk to each other”. Despite this, the selections were held in an almost euphoric atmosphere, and Afghan organizers and foreign colleagues were able to travel freely, unarmed and with minimal security precautions, throughout the most remote parts of the country. Information about the upcoming *Loya Jirga* was passed by word of mouth, since the country still had no telephone coverage, and no national television, radio or media capability.

The Emergency *Loya Jirga* which convened in June 2002 continued the free-wheeling political euphoria. Organized by the UN, representatives from the country gathered in their thousands in a large tent at Polytechnic University in Kabul. Most of the delegates did not know each other, and access to personal telephones was still in its nascent stage, accessible to only a few places in the country. The internet was unknown to the Afghan public. It was impossible for the delegates to reach back to their constituencies, and difficult for them to trust or cooperate with delegates from other parts of the country, other ethnic groups or with former opponents from the Communist and Civil War years, but nonetheless considerable progress was made and a consensus was achieved to support Hamid Karzai’s interim administration.

By the second such national meeting, the Constitutional *Loya Jirga* which began in December 2003, conditions had changed greatly. The delegates had come to know each other far better, television and radio coverage had begun to expand through parts of the country, and more cities and towns were linked by a telephone network. Provincial delegates who had been relatively unknown in 2002 were beginning to emerge as regional political figures, and were able to negotiate with traditional Afghan leaders from growing positions of power. Television and radio coverage of the event gave considerable exposure to the delegates.

The presidential campaign in 2004 saw even greater changes, with 17 presidential nominees who represented the spectrum of Afghan political life. Telephone, radio, and television had continued to expand coverage, and political rallies were held by the candidates throughout the country. Domestic security was still relatively good, and international monitors and embassy staffers were easily able to attend rallies and monitor polling sites. The UN and various embassies still played a central role, and implicit USG and international support for Interim President Karzai’s candidacy had great impact on his success in the polling booths in October of that year, where he garnered more than 55% of the votes cast to become the first democratically elected head of state in Afghanistan.

The heyday for Afghan elections was in 2005, when parliamentary and provincial council elections were held in September. It was the first parliamentary election since 1969. Although there were a number of casualties during the campaign period, the actual polling day saw minimal violence, and foreign observers were still generally able to travel throughout much of the country and feel welcome at the polling stations. The election logistics were complex and sophisticated, with a large degree of international

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support, numerous foreign observers and monitors, and well-orchestrated administration by the UN, the Afghan Joint Electoral Management Body and international and domestic security forces. The process began months in advance, with 130 international trainers teaching thousands of Afghans the intricacies of modern elections. These Afghans passed on their training in turn to others, and eventually 160,000 polling staff were selected to man 26,500 polling stations established in 8,300 locations throughout Afghanistan. Candidates were offered training as well, studying the Constitution, democratic election concepts and the niceties of public speaking and electioneering in NGO-led seminars held throughout the country. The timely distribution and collection of election materials and ballots in all 34 provinces eventually required 18 cargo planes, 9 helicopters, 1200 cargo truck deliveries, 1,247 donkeys, 306 horses and even 26 camels. All in all, it was a massive and very successful logistics, public education and political effort.

**The Challenges Ahead**

Despite the seemingly long period remaining before the first upcoming election, Afghan politicians have already focused on the event and have commenced unofficial campaigning. However, security and political conditions in Afghanistan have altered drastically since the last election in 2005.

Time has passed, and the political euphoria of the immediate post-Taliban era has evaporated, with problematic consequences for future elections and presidential and parliamentary hopefuls.

The region is evolving, and Afghanistan's neighbors may now have very opposing views from NATO and the western powers on how Afghanistan should look. Both Iran and Pakistan regard Afghanistan as very much within their sphere of influence, and it is unknown how Iranian and Pakistani policies will affect a future Afghan election and the continuation of the US and NATO security presence. A new administration in the United States may have different views about support for Afghanistan as well, and the member nations of NATO who send troops to Afghanistan have changing domestic political considerations that will impact on their level of commitment.

The electorate is changing at a rapid pace, and demographics will affect the choice of candidates. Because of substantial success in the education and communications sectors, Afghan society has changed significantly since the Presidential election in 2004 and the Parliamentary and Provincial Council elections in 2005. The rate of illiteracy has had a significant drop, national media improvements have given country-wide exposure to once little-known political figures, and memories of pre-2001 (the era of the Shah, the various Communist regimes, the Civil War and even the Taliban years) are fading.

The winning candidates will be chosen based on their post-Taliban records rather than their ties to Afghanistan's past history, and instead of the aging *mujaheddin* and provincial warlords who fought in the jihad during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan

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and influenced the Bonn Conference and early years of the new government, many of the activists in the next election will be urban, young and literate, with memories of refugee camps in their childhood. Their reference points will be the present occupation of Afghanistan by NATO forces, and many years of a Karzai administration which is noted for rampant corruption and nepotism in government circles. They will have legitimate demands for better education and employment possibilities, and will contrast conditions in Afghanistan to those of other countries in the region.

In the first years of the Karzai administration, many Afghans were ignorant of the wider world outside their own country. This has changed. Unlike the isolated and Afghanistan-centric electorates in the 2004 and 2005 elections, new voters will also be influenced by an increasing identification with and knowledge of what is happening in the greater Islamic world, because media coverage now brings footage from Baghdad, Islamabad, Tehran, Beirut and Gaza directly into Afghan homes. And with this media exposure often comes a more negative view towards the West in general and the US in particular.

Illegal narcotics production and smuggling has surged in Afghanistan, adding to security problems and to endemic corruption in the government and the security forces. Drug smugglers are certain to add considerable financial resources to the campaigns of their preferred candidates.

Increasing political instability in Pakistan directly impacts on the Afghan refugee population still living there, on all cross-border trade and transportation, and on the stability of the Afghan government. Pakistan's domestic political problems will affect the network of tribal relations that span the border area and impact directly on Kabul.

Although more than a year remains before serious campaigning can begin, speculation is ongoing in Afghan political circles. If President Hamid Karzai decides to run again in 2009, it will mean a continuation (beginning in 2001) of his 8 years as head of state. If he wins, 13 years in high office by a single person could have a detrimental effect on the concepts of democracy and peaceful transition of power, making him seem like one of the region's typical "President(s) for Life", and adding immeasurably to the growing Afghan political cynicism. Both the President's supporters and his opponents have already begun testing the waters in Afghanistan and with foreign countries to elicit signs of future support, and allegations of corruption, deceit and connections to foreign powers by one against the other are rife. Politics makes strange bedfellows, and given the Afghan political tradition of even bitter enemies forming temporary alliances to achieve a political end, there is no shortage of people and groups who want to take power in the next election, and the names and combinations will continue to evolve and change in the coming year.

Timing of the elections is now a subject of debate, with some in the international donor community pointing out that having separate elections for the President and Parliament is too costly and complicated. Suggestions have been made that the President's term could be lengthened by a year to coincide with parliamentary timing, but Karzai's critics vehemently oppose this step. Others note that the Parliamentarians' tenure in office

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could be shortened by one year, but this is opposed by Parliament. A third alternative, splitting the time gap to increase the President's time in office by six months and shortening the Parliamentarians' tenure by an equal six months, makes no one happy, and the issue remains a problem. Critics in Parliament also note that the President's term of office is specified to the month in the Constitution (Article 61) as is the tenure for the Parliament (Article 83), and that amending the terms of the Constitution can only be done by convening a *Loya Jirga*.

Most important, however, is the basic question of election logistics in an uneasy security environment. The security situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated to a point today where elections could not be held in many provinces, and an election which only took place in part of the country would be seen as invalid by the losers, leading to further security problems and possible upheaval. This would be especially true if a large stretch of already troubled Pashtun districts were unable to vote. Voters unable to cast their ballots would not accept a winning candidate from another ethnic group or a rival clan, and such districts would also be unwilling to accept the legitimacy of Members of Parliament, or governors and security officials appointed by the new President.

Although the Afghan Independent Election Commission can call on considerable local expertise in the thousands of workers who assisted at previous elections, Afghan election workers would face danger in carrying out their duties. International observers would find it impossible to travel to many areas, and in others would have to be accompanied by convoys of armed guards. Logistics would be affected by attacks and sabotage from insurgents, and candidates would find it impossible to campaign freely in public. The increase in assassinations of officials, in threats to government servants, police and military, and IED and suicide bomb incidents would – if they continue – simply make election logistics and campaigning too dangerous to carry out.

**Future Scenarios:**

Are there alternatives to the election process? There are no easy answers, and the same domestic political question is handled in a variety of ways by Afghanistan's neighbors. Although it is enshrined in the country's new Constitution, the very concept of elections as part of the political process is a new one to Afghanistan itself, which has more familiarity with power transferring through coups and assassinations than it does with the ballot box. The democratic process in Afghanistan is still in its infancy.

If a national election could not be held, there is both a traditional as well as a Constitutional basis for convening a *Loya Jirga*, a grand council which would make a final decision about elections, or in the event that an election is not feasible, make a decision about the country's leadership through a change in the Constitution. Holding a *Loya Jirga* would answer many of the security, financial and logistic difficulties involved in a country-wide election, although the agenda and final outcome might deviate considerably from what NATO/ISAF, the USA, and the present Afghan administration consider acceptable. Problems might arise because it would be difficult to control the agenda of a *Loya Jirga*, and because the Constitutional regulations describing the

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makeup of the *Loya Jirga* give great weight to people personally appointed by the President to the Upper House of Parliament in 2005. Reverting to a *Loya Jirga* might be a practical remedy, but it would also pose considerable danger to the concept of popular elections and would open the door for small interest groups to seize considerable political power over the new administration.

Security in Afghanistan might improve, possibly through ISAF/NATO efforts as well as those of a better trained Afghan police and army force, possibly through negotiation between the government and the insurgents, and possibly as a result of sheer battle fatigue. Iran and Pakistan might agree that an honest Afghan election is in their own interests, and cooperate in the effort to improve internal security. The Afghan judicial system could become more effective and efficient, punishing anyone who tried to tamper with the election process. A viable list of candidates could emerge and the candidates remain alive and healthy throughout the campaign process. The international community might finally agree that holding and funding two elections is viable, and the insurgents in Afghanistan might reach the conclusion that their best hope of obtaining power is through joining the present government and seeking the election of candidates favorable to their cause.

A positive shift in any of the areas above could open the way for a successful election. These are all problematic, however, and under present conditions it is difficult to be optimistic that a free and fair election resulting in an orderly transmission of authority in the traditional western sense can occur in Afghanistan's foreseeable future. Nothing is impossible however. Ultimately the Afghan people themselves must take responsibility for the next step in their political development. Whether or not NATO, the United States and the United Nations agree, holding elections and determining the future shape of their government is an Afghan decision, and the "if, when and how" will be determined by the Afghans themselves.

Note: The author participated in both Afghan *Loya Jirgas*, and was an observer at both the presidential and parliamentary elections in Afghanistan, where he also worked closely with the Afghan Parliament.

Useful Websites:

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