

Afghanistan: 2014 Election Plans Seen as Flawed

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President wants to recycle voter IDs used in previous, controversial elections.

As Afghans look ahead to a critical presidential election in just over a year's time, some commentators are already warning that the process will be fatally flawed, and that certain groups will be effectively disenfranchised.

The current president, Hamed Karzai, cannot stand again, but his opponents believe he will line up an associate or even a relative to take his place in polls scheduled for April 2014. A proposal to recycle voter IDs from the last round of elections – itself roundly criticised as riddled with fraud – only confirms them in that belief.

Despite earlier suggestions that voters should be issued with all-new biometric documents to ensure a transparent election, President Karzai made it clear he opposed this at a January 14 press conference.

“Distributing voter IDs with electronic [data] will cost 80 million dollars, and it isn't possible to carry this out in the short time that remains. Besides, we don't have the money and no one else will provide it,” he said. “Therefore, if we invalidate the old IDs and are ultimately unable to deliver the new ones, then I will be held accountable for it.”

The Independent Election Commission has opposed the move. Speaking a day after Karzai's remarks, its chairman . Fazel Ahmad Manawi said a failure to hold a new registration process and issued new documents would “undermine transparency”, in comments reported by Tolo News.

However, speaking to IWPR, Karzai's spokesman Aimal Faizi indicated that a decision to use existing voter IDs had already been taken.

“The decision to use the old voting cards was taken several months ago, because the government had some meetings with [representatives of] the international community who declined to fund new cards,” he said. “Furthermore, meetings were held at the presidential office with all opposition leaders, concerning the election law and the IEC's organisational plan.”

The IEC declined to respond to IWPR's questions about what it was planning to do.

The last presidential polls, held in 2009, and a parliamentary election the following year, both resulted in allegations of widespread irregularities and outright fraud. The 2010 vote resulted in months of wrangling, during which President Karzai set up a special court that effectively called into question the IEC and the Electoral Complaints Commission. In August 2011, the IEC disbarred nine members of parliament and named others to take their places.

A coordinating council that represents a range of Afghan political parties has now urged Karzai to refrain from interfering in electoral matters, in particular with regard to voter IDs.

The council has also expressed concern at the lack of legislation to regulate how the 2014 elections – for provincial councils as well as the president – are to be run. A bill has been submitted to parliament, but it is yet to be passed.

Political analyst Wahid Mozhdha said the Afghan parliament was to blame for not processing this “hugely important national document”.

“Most members of parliament are wheeler-dealers who place their personal interests above the national interest,” he added.

According to Fazel Rahman Oriya, a political analyst who is part of the coordinating council, “Karzai is trying to prevent any adjustment or modification to [existing] election legislation.”

He warned that “if the government interferes in the election, political parties and blocs may use every legal avenue to ensure justice and a transparent vote”.

Karzai's spokesmen said political parties were free to say whatever they wanted, but that did not make it true.

“Everyone has a right to criticise, but it's important what people make of these claims,” Faizi added.

He said Afghans themselves and the international community were capable of keeping track of the electoral process and making sure no one interfered in it, either from inside or outside Afghanistan.

“Hamed Karzai is determined to support fair and transparent elections because he does not want to leave a poor legacy after 14 years’ service,” Faizi said. “He will not interfere in electoral matters unless the law allows him to.”

Given that 2014 will see the withdrawal of NATO-led forces from Afghanistan as well as this key election, some analysts are predicting major turmoil as the two events combine to reinforce deep divisions.

“Most of the Pashtun areas are under the direct or psychological influence of the government’s armed opponents [Taleban et al], so many of the Pashtuns will be unable to participate in the poll,” Mozhda said. “If a non-Pashtun candidate wins [the presidency], that will mean civil war, because the Pashtun majority will feel itself excluded. But if a Pashtun candidate wins as a result of some pre-arranged fix by local forces and foreign powers, the non-Pashtuns will oppose him. Either way, there’s a risk of civil war, which could balkanise this country.”

Mozhda is certain the 2014 election will go ahead regardless of the risks.

“The Americans are going to support holding an election at any cost, as it will be a marker of success. If it doesn’t take place, it will be seen as an American failure as well – it will be the end of democracy in this country.”

Faizi dismissed warnings of chaos, saying there was a plan in place to ensure voting took place in “relative security”.

“Our security agencies are working with their international partners on this plan. I won’t share more details for the time being. But there is absolutely no possibility of civil war,” he said.

Given the poor security situation and widespread disillusionment in national politics, it is will not be easy to make Afghan voters enthusiastic about coming to the polls.

Schoolteacher Ghulam Mujtaba, for example, sees the forthcoming election as a project by “America, Britain, France , Germany, Iran, Pakistan, India, Russia, Saudi Arabia and others”, each of which has its own political protégés in Afghanistan.

The 2001 Bonn Agreements created less of a government than a “corporation in which foreign states and powerful domestic robbers took out shares”, Mujtaba said. In the 2014 elections, he predicted, “one group of robbers will leave and another will come to power”.

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