

Election Officials Prepare for Painstaking Count

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Observers and political agents keep a close watch as ballot papers brought in by donkey are sorted ahead of the final count.

Troops of the Afghan National Army keep watch from behind sandbagged position, guarding a compound ringed with barbed wire.

The fortifications, in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif, are there to protect Afghanistan's experiment in fair elections. The soldiers have been posted to ensure security as electoral officials begin the laborious task of sifting through the ballot papers.

This counting centre is one of seven set up around the country and will serve five of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. Within the building, normally the sports gym of Balkh university, there are separate counting points where officials will handle ballot papers brought in from Balkh, Jowzjan, Faryab, Sar-e-Pul and Samangan provinces.

Final turnout figures in the presidential election have not yet been released, but the local office of the Joint Electoral Management Body, JEMB, estimates that nearly all the 1.5 million who registered to vote in the five northern provinces actually took part in the ballot.

Even bringing in the ballot boxes from 726 polling centres to be counted in Mazar-e-Sharif is an arduous process, with some being transported by horse or donkey, or carried on foot.

At the moment, officials are simply checking through the ballot papers as they continue to arrive, and the JEMB chief responsible for this part of Afghanistan, Mohammad Nazari, says the count itself will not begin before around October 20.

In an effort to ensure the process is transparent, agents for presidential candidates and political parties, as well as five international observers, are present as count officers go through each batch of ballot papers, checking them against returns recorded by polling stations, mixing them so that no one will know how people voted at a particular polling station, and boxing them up for the final count. All the work is done painstakingly by hand.

At the Mazar-e-Sharif counting centre, most of the candidate agents appeared content that the process so far had been fair.

Only the representatives of Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq raised objections, complaining that they were initially refused entry to the counting centre.

"At the end of election day [October 9], when the boxes were taken to the counting centre, Mohaqiq's representatives were not allowed to enter the centre," said Mohammed Abdo, one of the candidate's agents.

But Nazari said it was the agents' own fault, "Mohaqiq's representatives didn't go through the procedures [informing JEMB so that it could issue instructions to admit them] yet they insisted on coming in, and

security officials at the centre didn't allow them to enter."

Haji Abdul Momin Khairkhwa and Fazluddin Khurami, who represent incumbent president Hamed Karzai and strong contender Mohammad Younis Qanuni, respectively, expressed satisfaction for the way things had been handled.

"I haven't seen any substantial irregularities in the process of checking and transferring the ballot boxes so far. The JEMB office accepts our suggestions and criticisms if any problems arise," said Khurami.

Khurami noted that political agents did experience some problems gaining admittance to the counting centre early on election day, but matters were quickly resolved.

Once the count is finished here, as at the other counting centres located in Kabul, Herat, Kunduz, Jalalabad, Gardez and Bamian, the results will be sent to the capital for the final tally.

A final announcement on who is to be Afghanistan's next president – assuming a clear win with no second round required – is expected on October 30.

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Location: [Afghanistan](#)

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