

Elections Close Not With a Bang, But a Whimper

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As fears of Taliban attacks fade, election day is marred by arguments over disappearing ink.

Afghanistan's historic presidential election at the weekend ended not in the widescale violence that had been feared but rather with wrangling over whether the ballot was free and fair.

With the sun in Kabul obscured by dust kicked up by strong winds on election day, the political atmosphere was equally clouded by procedural complaints lodged by most of the candidates challenging incumbent president Hamed Karzai.

Although the mayhem threatened by Taliban militants failed to materialise, and IWPR reporters in the field reported a solid turnout in the Pashtun south as well as other parts of the country, the final outcome of the vote, which may not be known for several weeks, was already being disputed.

At 4 pm on October 9, as many polling stations were closing, 15 of the 17 candidates standing in opposition to Karzai issued a statement urging their supporters to boycott the vote, alleging widespread fraud. Two others - Sayed Ishaq Gailani and Hasib Aryan - had previously announced they were backing Karzai.

After meeting at the home of candidate Abdul Satar Sirat, the candidates issued a statement listing their reasons for boycotting the process.

The statement, read by Sirat, said that the ink used to mark voters' thumbs, which was supposed to have been indelible to prevent people voting more than once, rubbed off easily, allowing cases of repeat voting where people had acquired more than one voter registration card.

The statement also charged that foreign nationals had been allowed to vote; that foreign and domestic election observers had pressured voters; and that candidates' representatives had been expelled from some polling stations.

In addition, the candidates alleged that Karzai supporters were using various forms of manipulation, such as closing polling stations where voters were not voting for the "right man", and fraudulently filling out ballot papers.

"Based on these fraudulent actions, members of the council of candidates declare the result of today's election illegal and null and void, and... demand that a fresh election be held at the earliest opportunity in a fair and transparent manner, free from fraud, intimidation and interference," said the statement read by Sirat. "The government that is formed as a result of today's election will be illegal and without legitimacy."

Earlier in the day, the dissenting candidates had held a four-hour meeting, ending in a press statement from Sirat saying, "Our nation should have been proud of its first experience of democracy. Unfortunately, this is a black day in the history of democracy, and a painful day for the Afghan nation."

IWPR reporters who voted found that the ink washed off easily with soap and water. In Kabul's Khair Khana district, a 25-year-old man, who did not give his name, told a reporter that he had voted five times by washing the ink off and using several registration cards issued in his name.

As reports of the problem came in from across the country early on election day, the Joint Electoral Management Body, JEMB, issued a statement saying that some election officials were not using the indelible ink supplied for the purpose, and that instructions were being issued to correct the situation.

Two of the 15, however, quickly disassociated themselves from the boycott.

Massouda Jalal, the only woman standing for the presidency, said almost immediately that she was not taking part in the protest and urged her fellow candidates to avoid leading the country towards instability.

"As a woman, I want peace and security, and I'm against violence and conflict. I'd rather accept the will of the people," she said.

On the day after the vote, Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq, who was expected to do well among the ethnic Hazara electorate, also made it known that he was no longer part of the group.

His spokesman Mohammad Mubariz Raashid told IWPR, "We are not involved in the candidates' protest. We have [instead] proposed the establishment of a commission to investigate errors that occurred during the election, and if it transpires that they were [merely] technical problems, we will accept the results of this election."

Ahmad Shah Ahmadzai, standing firm with the 12 other remaining boycotters, agreed that an investigative commission was needed, but he made the much tougher demand that the body should be completely separate from the existing JEMB and must complete its work before the election results were made public.

"We don't trust a single one of the JEMB members," he said. "We want [it] dissolved and a new commission assigned to the investigation. The results of that commission will be acceptable to us."

It was unclear, however, exactly how the protesters planned to pursue their complaint or what avenues were open to them under the law.

Asked what candidates would do if their demands were not met, Ahmadzai replied, "We have made our views known, and [if the results stand] it will be unclear and questionable whether Karzai is president or not."

Late on October 9, Manoel de Almeida e Silva, a spokesman for the United Nations Assistance Mission for Afghanistan, UNAMA, which has supported the election process, said, "We cannot postpone the election as suggested by these candidates. It does not lie within the powers of the international community, but rather of the JEMB."

Robert Barry, head of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE, mission to Afghanistan which has provided a limited team of observers for the ballot, told reporters the following day that his organisation agreed that the poll should not be cancelled. He noted that some irregularities had occurred but said they were not significant.

Karzai dismissed the candidates' complaints out of hand, saying, "A nation of more than 10 million [voters] is more important than 15 candidates."

Political analyst Mohammad Sediq Patman thinks the furore over the non-indelible ink is no more than a pretext.

"They were talking about a boycott [even] before the election, because they didn't share a common view and had been unable to select one candidate to represent all of them against Karzai," he said.

Patman suggested that the candidates may have been hoping for a low turnout, which would have made Karzai more dependent on them and thus likely to include them in his new administration.

But as it became apparent on election day that more people than had been expected were turning out to vote, Karzai's rivals grew increasingly concerned and felt they had to make a move, said Patman.

"The majority of candidates enjoy local, not national, support, so they brought up this issue [fraud allegations] to demonstrate to their supporters that they'd been cheated - when in fact they could never have won," he said.

Mohammad Qasim Akhgar, another Kabul-based analyst, doubts the boycott will affect the outcome of the election.

"The ink issue isn't so important as to mean the election should be cancelled. It [the election] is a right belonging to the nation, not to 14 candidates," he said.

On the streets of Kabul, many people took a similar view.

Unemployed doctor Rasul Dad, 27, said, "There's a well-known saying in Pashtu that if you're swept away by a flood, you'll clutch at any branch. They sensed they were losing, so they announced a boycott."

Salim Nejrabi, 25, made the point that Karzai was by no means the only candidate who might benefit from election fraud, saying, "My neighbour had 16 voter registration cards, and voted 16 times for [Mohammad Younis] Qanuni."

Massoud, the 38-year-old owner of a computer shop, took an opposing view, saying that the election had been imposed on Afghans and had proved unfair. "In the afternoon, when people learned about the fraud, lots of them regretted that they had voted," he added.

Violent incidents directly related to the voting process do not appear to have been widespread. There were reports of clashes between the Afghan National Army and militants south of Kabul, and between Coalition forces and suspected Taleban in the central Oruzgan region, resulting in a number of casualties. Rocket attacks on a number of urban centres left at least two people injured.

Braving fear of attack, and the bad weather in some mountainous regions, Afghans formed queues at polling stations all across the country. Kabul was subdued, with few vehicles on the road, but people were on the streets going to vote despite the security concerns.

In Mazar-e-Sharif, in the north of Afghanistan, IWPR observed a similar determination to vote among many

people. A woman holding her sick child in her lap said, "I had a doctor's appointment, but my husband said, 'Let's go and vote beforehand'."

As polling stations were due to close, young men in the streets of Mazar-e-Sharif called to each other, "hurry up, don't miss the polls."

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