

Elections a Learning Experience

Author: [Grant Kippen](#)

Questions remain about the candidates' policies and campaign financing, but the election offers Afghans a historic opportunity to shape their future.

Election fever has officially come to Afghanistan. The Joint Electoral Management Body, JEMB, made an important and historic decision in early August when it set the date of the presidential election for October 9. With approximately 10.5 million potential voters registered, the scene was set for an exciting campaign period that officially kicked off on September 7.

Equally important was the decision to postpone the date of the elections for the Wolesi Jirga, or lower house of parliament, until spring 2005. This was not a popular decision, given that the delegates to the Constitutional Loya Jirga earlier this year called for "best efforts" to be made in holding simultaneous elections.

While a number of political figures criticised the deferment of the parliamentary elections, it should be pointed out that this decision was not taken lightly. Issues such as security, the operational capacity to undertake both sets of elections, and the creation of a level playing-field for all the candidates, were but a few of the factors taken into consideration. What is heartening about the JEMB's decision is that it demonstrates a sensitivity as well as a commitment to protecting the integrity of the democratic process, something that is vitally important at this embryonic stage.

For those political observers who are intently watching this seminal period in Afghanistan's history, what are the other issues that are likely to have an impact on the campaign?

The first issue is identification of the vice-presidents on the nomination papers. One should not lose sight of the fact that Afghans will be voting for a "ticket", not just one individual for president.

A second important issue will be access to media. Prior to the official election campaign period, the JEMB established a media commission to ensure that all candidates are treated in a fair and equitable manner by the media. In a country where state-owned media outlets play a dominant role in the marketplace, every effort is being made to provide all the candidates with the ability to communicate their messages to voters across the country.

One potentially contentious issue will be that of campaign financing. At present, there are no rules on the limit of funds that can be spent by candidates during the campaign period – only that candidates are restricted from using funds from international sources or from illegal means. What is not clear is whether there will be any monitoring or reporting requirements on what has been spent by the candidates. This means that there is the potential for large sums of untraceable money that could be spent prior to and during the campaign period. Whether this will be seen by voters as a positive or negative attribute remains to be seen, but it could well become a major campaign issue.

Last but not least, the question arises of what the candidates will actually be talking about during the campaign.

To date, much of the policy debate in this country has been focused around meeting certain conditions set out in the Bonn agreement of December 2001. At the major international donor meeting that was held in Berlin in March, a long-term donor plan was tabled. But since that point, there has been a relative lack of discussion around what the priorities of the new administration should be.

Look for the candidates to begin articulating their vision for the future of the country and the policy priorities of their government if they are elected on October 9.

Afghan politics has tended to be personality-focused, so look at the balance being struck by the candidates between personal characteristics on the one hand and policy goals on the other.

It is important to remember that elections are but one part of a much longer-term democratic process. The evolution of this country from a conflict-ridden state to a modern developing nation will take time. The majority of the people and institutions participating in the October 9 election will be doing so for the first time in their lives. We should not lose sight of the fact that this exercise will be an important learning experience for both democratic organisations and voters, so we need to be patient and supportive.

The political parties and presidential candidates are already preparing their supporters for the electoral challenges that lie ahead. One of those challenges is to clearly understand the rules and regulations guiding the electoral process. When one thinks of the logistical and organisational requirements of supporting a national campaign for president, it doesn't take long to realise that it will require significant numbers of people to properly field a winning campaign.

Many international organisations are involved in supporting the electoral process, including the United Nations Assistance Mission for Afghanistan, the National Democratic Institute, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, the International Republican Institute, Swiss Peace, and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, among others. The emphasis of the programming is almost exclusively on building domestic capacity so that Afghans themselves are responsible and accountable for the development of the democratic institutions and processes that will carry this nation forward.

Afghans should be proud of what these elections mean to the future of their country. Participating in this historic vote will become a source of pride, and each voter will be able to say that he or she had the ability to take part in a process that has started to bring stability and order to the country.

Grant Kippen is Country Director in Afghanistan for the United States-based National Democratic Institution for International Affairs. This article first appeared in the Kabul magazine Afghan Scene (www.afghanscene.com)

Location: [Afghanistan](#)

Topic: [Comment](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/elections-learning-experience>