

## **Herati Run-off Boycott Likely**

**Author:** [Mohammad Shafi Ferozi](#)

Many residents say the fraud and intimidation that marred the first round has put them off taking part in the second.

With a second round looming in Afghanistan's presidential election, the war of words has started between the candidates, but many disillusioned ordinary voters are preparing to boycott the process.

"I will not vote and I will not allow any member of family to participate either," grumbled Ghulam Mahboob, a shopkeeper in the Chawki Gulha area of Herat city. "I faced threats and other problems to vote in the first election, but it was all for nothing. There is no guarantee that these elections will be any more transparent."

On November 7, Afghanistan will hold its long-awaited election run-off. The first round, on August 20, was so badly marred by fraud that it took two months for the final results to be released. President Hamed Karzai, who narrowly failed to secure the 50-percent-plus-one vote necessary for victory, strenuously resisted a second round, insisting that he had won close to 55 per cent of the vote. It took frantic diplomacy by the international community to avert a serious political crisis.

Karzai announced the run-off on October 20, and since then the country has been in a fever of preparation. It is no easy matter to organise elections given Afghanistan's inhospitable terrain and unforgiving climate.

The time constraints are severe - if the preparations drag on too long, winter will set in, making any elections impossible until the snow melts in the spring. Ballot papers and boxes are being sent to the most remote corners of the country, and the various election bodies are engaging in a subtle tug-of-war about responsibilities for the poll.

But more important, perhaps, than the physical arrangements of the election will be the mental and emotional state of the potential voters.

Turnout in the first round was quite low. According to the Electoral Complaints Commission, which investigated fraud allegations, just 4.3 million valid votes were cast out of an estimated voter population of 12-15 million.

Judging by the reaction of Heratis, this vote could see much lower returns.

"These elections have been a political game from the very beginning," said Massoud Ahmadi, a student at Herat University. "It was being played by the Afghan government and its foreign allies. It was a big blow to people's confidence, so I think that we will have a minimal number of participants in the second round."

Akbar Shah, a motorcycle repair man in Herat, becomes angry at the mere mention of a second round.

"As an Afghan I was ashamed when Karzai announced the run-off," he said, working on an engine while he

spoke. "The most prominent man in the country was involved in fraud, and he said the elections had been defamed."

Karzai, rather than accepting responsibility for any of the wholesale vote-rigging that occurred on August 20, insisted that the election bodies had "disrespected" and "defamed" the elections.

Akbar Shah will not go to the polls again. "Either my vote will not be counted, or I will have my finger cut off," he said.

The Taleban and other insurgents are once again threatening violence if Afghans participate in the elections. In the first round, several people fell victim to Taleban threats to cut off the ink-stained index finger that marked a person as having voted.

The only people in Herat who seem to be happy about the upcoming vote are those working on the election team of Karzai's challenger, Abdullah Abdullah. The former foreign minister received 31 per cent of the vote against Karzai's 48 per cent, according to figures released by election observation organisation Democracy International.

But in Herat the two men were much closer: Karzai, with 44.5 per cent, had just a slight edge over Abdullah, with nearly 42 per cent.

"We tried very hard to get to this second round," said Ghulam Jailani Firozkohi, Abdullah's campaign chief in Herat. "We are completely prepared, and we will win this election."

Karzai's election team also say they are ready for the second round.

"We respect the constitution," said Faqir Ahmad Bayangar, a Karzai campaigner in Herat. "We will campaign for this run-off."

In the weeks leading up to the release of the final results and the announcement of the second round, many Karzai supporters threatened to boycott the latter.

The Independent Election Commission, IEC, the Afghan body that is overseeing the elections, is also prepared, according to Zia Ahmad Zia, IEC head in Herat. Its chief task will be to motivate people to go to the polls, he said.

"We hope there will be international observers present," he said. "There were problems in the recent elections."

The IEC is under pressure from the United Nations to dismiss some of its district commissioners who were implicated in the fraud. While the UN is tasked with helping to ensure that the poll is free and fair, the IEC is resisting its recommendations, saying the decision to hire or fire staff rests solely with the commission.

Zia said that he would reconsider some of the staff if he was ordered to do so by his superiors.

Security, which was a problem in much of the country during the first round, will not be an issue, said Herat security chief Esmatullah Alizai.

“We had the best security in the country on August 20,” he said. “We will do the same thing this time.” Foreign forces would help to secure the poll, he added.

Police Chief Ekramuddin Yawar is also confident that instability will not prevent Heratis from voting.

“We have more than 7,000 police ready to ensure that the opposition cannot do anything in the western zone,” he said.

Mohammad Rafiq Shahir, head of the Experts’ Council of Herat, does not share the population’s scepticism.

“This is an opportunity,” he said. “It is a matter of pride that Afghanistan is being ruled by the law.”

Shahir did not deny that there might be some problems with the vote, but said he was sure that the massive vote-rigging that occurred on August 20 would not be repeated.

But political analyst Abdul Wahid Mokhles is not so confident that the run-off will be successful.

“There was foreign interference in the elections, as well as pressure on officials of the Independent Election Commission,” he said. “There was propaganda against the IEC, which made the situation very complicated. And we really have no idea how many people will vote in this run-off.”

Mohammad Shafi Ferozi and Mohammad Ishaq Quraishi are IWPR trainees in Herat.

**Location:** [Afghanistan](#)

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