

US Election Eye-opener in Kabul

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Afghan reporters surprised at frank debate between political rivals and high levels of support for the opposition in United States election.

The election atmosphere was almost festive, with people from different sides of the political divide happy to talk about their choice of candidate and why they wanted to see him win.

Two of IWPR's Afghan reporters who watched the returns coming in were surprised by the frankness with which voters spoke - but then this was the United States presidential election. Both journalists had also covered Afghanistan's first direct presidential ballot on October 9, and recalled that voters were often reluctant to disclose who they had voted for.

The reporters spent much of November 3 - the day interim president Hamed Karzai was officially declared the winner in the Afghan election - at the American embassy in Kabul, joining US nationals as they watched the early returns from the previous day's vote.

It was an exercise on comparative politics. To their surprise, the reporters found that most of the Americans they interviewed supported John Kerry, the Democratic candidate, over Republican incumbent George W Bush, and felt that a change of US administration would also be good for Afghanistan.

To cover the story, they had to arrive at the embassy early in the morning to pass through tight security screening. Night still blanketed the city, and after guards checked their names against the roster and let them through, they were led to the embassy cafeteria, opposite the main building.

Inside the cafeteria, two wide-screen televisions were set up in different corners, providing live CNN coverage. Americans, most of them civilians, arrived from all over Kabul to watch the election results unfold. They ate breakfast but their eyes were glued to the screens.

It quickly became clear who most of this unscientifically selected group of Americans supported. Whenever Kerry picked up another state, the audience clapped and shouted. But as Bush started to pull in more votes, the disappointment could be read on their faces, and some broke out in a sweat.

Most interviewees said they supported Kerry, and grew increasingly unhappy with the emerging results.

"Well, from the numbers, it's looking like it will be President Bush, which for me is not a good thing," said Leslie Wilson, from Illinois. She said she voted for Kerry, adding, "I really value the things he values and the messages that he holds. I would be really disappointed if things turn out the way the early signs are. But until the big states report, we can remain hopeful."

Asked whether she thought a Kerry presidency would be better for Afghanistan, Wilson said, "If Kerry does win, I think he will do a thoughtful analysis of how the Bush policy actions have gone, and if he feels there's a need for adjustment - perhaps to continue to try to engage NATO and other nations more - then he will do that."

Scott Braunschweig, from Wisconsin, agreed, "With Bush, the fear is that they will pull troops out of

Afghanistan, he'll move on and there'll be another focus. Whereas with Kerry, I think he will be more likely to stay, work with the UN and make sure that we help Afghanistan continue rebuilding."

Asked which candidate was more likely to increase the US military presence in Afghanistan, Braunschweig said, "I don't think with either one there's going to be an increase in troops. If anyone, Kerry's more likely to stay in Afghanistan."

Terry Grace from California said he thought Kerry would reinvigorate US policy toward Afghanistan.

"American foreign policy should take a different approach," he said. "If John Kerry is elected, there will be additional commitments to the reconstruction and to the security of Afghanistan, and the reason is that John Kerry recognises that Afghanistan is essential for democracy in Central Asia. Afghanistan is really a keystone and the great bridge of democracy that America is trying to build in different parts of the world."

Not everyone in the room was a Kerry supporter, however.

Scott Short from Idaho voted for Bush by absentee ballot. "I believe that George Bush ... will be able to maintain the direction that we're headed [in]," he said. "I personally believe that it's important for the stability of the programmes that we're working on for the country of Afghanistan and its people."

Short, who works on reconstruction projects, said he would not comment on high-level matters of policy. But he added, "I think there's a tremendous amount of effort by the Coalition forces... to help build those structures that you need to provide security for your own country, and I think every day you see improvement in those areas."

Perhaps the most striking thing from an Afghan reporter's point of view was the level of technical sophistication in the US election. In Afghanistan, the presidential vote was plagued by logistical and technical problems. The counting process took over 20 days so that on the day of the American election, Afghan voters were still waiting for their own results to be announced.

Another contrast was that Bush and Kerry supporters felt able to criticise each other openly and make confident projections of electoral victory. In Afghanistan, candidates exchanged recriminations, and on election day 15 of them threatened to boycott the process altogether.

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