

Voter Registration Lags in North

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With only a sixth of eligible voters in northern provinces registered so far, elections scheduled for September may have to be postponed again.

Voter registration for elections in September is badly behind schedule in northern Afghanistan, threatening the timing of the vote and the credibility of the elections should they still be conducted as scheduled.

The difficulties in the north come amid severe problems in the south and east of the country, where the Taliban is resurgent and United Nations staff have also had difficulty registering voters.

After six months of voter registration efforts, and with the process due to be completed by the end of this month, just over one-sixth of eligible voters in the north have been registered.

The UN registration process began in early December for both the presidential and parliamentary elections, the first democratic national vote in the country in nearly 40 years.

After decades of authoritarian rule and nearly a quarter of a century of conflict, the election is seen as an opportunity for Afghans to finally curb ethnic rivalries and Islamic extremism and embrace peace and democracy.

The elections are also important to the West. A successful vote would be seen as vindicating the decision to crush al-Qaeda and topple the Taliban after the attacks of September 11, 2001. And with violence and unrest continuing in Iraq, President Bush is hoping that the election of the pro-Western Hamed Karzai will help his own prospects for re-election in November.

But so far, only 2.5 million people have registered. The UN had set a target of registering 10.5 million eligible voters.

Large parts of the south and east of the country, the so-called "Pashtun belt", are no-go areas for UN staffers because of growing Taliban and al-Qaeda violence.

The north, meanwhile, remains in thrall to rival warlords whose skirmishing troops threaten security and undermine confidence.

The provincial field co-ordinator for the voter registration in the north, Al Hussein Jalloh, described the process there as "very fruitful" and said it was being carried out successfully.

"Large numbers of people are coming to get voting cards in our registration centres," he said. "In total, we have registered 280,000 eligible people - 175,000 men and 105,000 women."

But, he added, "We are supposed to register one-and-a-half million people."

In the regional capital, Mazar-e Sharif, accounts for 200,000 of the voters registered to date. Since the programme moved out into five northern provinces a month ago, only 80,000 more have been signed up.

With registration due to be completed by June 30, there is increasing speculation that the process may be extended, or that parliamentary elections at least may be postponed, probably to next year.

The 78-million US-dollar election effort has been dogged by problems from the start. Security concerns and a shortage of money, caused by donor countries not providing the financing they had promised, meant that fewer registration sites and international supervisors were available. One UN senior official said the operation started at one-third of the scale expected.

As the programme fell behind schedule, and security worsened, elections were put back from June to September. But if the election goes ahead and millions of Afghans are disenfranchised, observers warn that the credibility of results, and the legitimacy of president and parliament, will be seriously damaged.

Andrew Wilder, director of the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, has warned "that holding elections prematurely could do more to promote instability and conflict rather than lasting peace".

Others say it was a mistake to try to hold elections while the country was still insecure. "We should have had five years to pull off these elections, not a few months," said one senior UN official.

Time is short and many obstacles remain. Afghanistan, with a poorly-educated population and broken by years of war, has virtually no tradition of democracy. Aid workers speak of the palpable sense of cynicism

when people are told that the election could improve their everyday lives.

The rural areas where most people live are remote and pose increased risks for UN registration teams. Temperatures are already starting to soar as summer approaches.

In some areas of the north, villagers have been warned by local commanders not to register. Others have been told to boycott the process by village elders, who say they don't need democracy.

There are also reports of irregularities in the registration process, with some people ineligible to vote being given registration cards, and other voters getting three or ballot cards.

"People can vote only once," stressed Jalloh. "It is a crime to have three cards."

Getting women to register has also been difficult. In a deeply conservative society, many men will not allow women in their household to vote, and women themselves have been reluctant to leave their homes and travel to registration sites.

But the UN, which earlier expressed concern at the low number of women registering, has now reported an increase in the number of women coming forward. So far, 779,000, or just over a third of all those registered countrywide, have been women.

"This increase has been made possible through the efforts of those involved in civic education and also because of the involvement and support of Afghan leaders," said Manoel de Almeida e Silva, spokesman for the UN's special representative to Afghanistan. "An example of this came from a recent declaration by the Ulema Council, a group of religious elders, which urged all Afghans who are eligible to vote to take part in the election.

Despite the obstacles, many Afghans say they are anxious for the opportunity to cast a ballot.

At a voter registration site at Baktash School in Mazar-e-Sharif, Nazira, 26, said, "This is a good chance for women to get voting cards. I, on behalf of Afghan women, want to take part in this process."

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Iraq
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