

Young Heratis Have Little Faith in Elections

Author: [Mohammad Shafi Ferozi](#)

Many believe outcome of ballot will be determined by foreign powers.

Everybody knows the United States will choose the next president of Afghanistan," said Shah Rahman Afzali. "We should not participate in sham elections."

Afzali is not an illiterate farmer, indoctrinated by the Taliban about "puppet presidents" and "infidel elections", but a student at Herat University. And he is by no means alone in his views. Among Herat's intellectual elite, it is widely believed that NATO countries will determine the outcome of Afghanistan's presidential and provincial council elections, scheduled for August 20.

Herat, which sits on Afghanistan's border with Iran, is one of the country's most cultured and developed cities. But political disaffection is rife, particularly among the most highly educated segment of the population.

"We are imprisoned," said Wajiha, an economics student. "Countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Italy control us. They claim that Afghanistan is a democracy, but this is not true."

Another student, who did want to give his name, agreed, "I will never vote as long as foreign countries decide everything in Afghanistan."

The international community has been at some pains to deny that they are interfering in Afghanistan's elections. The US in particular has stated, publicly and repeatedly, that they will neither support nor oppose any candidate. Over the past week, the American embassy in Kabul issued yet another public statement reaffirming their neutrality.

But these protestations are falling flat, at least in Herat.

Many Afghans have a difficult time believing that NATO countries, especially the US, have abandoned their activist role in Afghan politics.

Hamed Karzai was hand-picked by then US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad to head the interim administration in 2001, and the Afghan president enjoyed strong support from the Bush White House. Karzai was commonly seen as an American puppet, and Afghans often joked that their country was "the 51st state".

But years of disappointment and frustration have intervened since the heady days of Karzai's first election, in 2004, when he triumphed over 17 rivals, receiving 54 per cent of the vote in a first-round victory. The Afghan president's close association with the US became more of a liability than an asset as support for the foreign presence waned.

Karzai has had serious and public disagreements with the Obama administration, and many observers think that Washington would not be unhappy to see someone else in Kabul's presidential palace.

But whether they persist in the view that Karzai has America's blessing, or think that the international community has anointed another candidate, Herat's young and educated have little faith that the elections will reflect the will of the people.

"The United States supported Karzai last time and they will support him again," said one man who did not want to give his name. "Karzai will be the winner."

Another passer-by, who was also reluctant to give his name, thought differently.

"Mirwais Yassini is the American candidate," he said, naming a parliamentarian who, while not well-known within Afghanistan, has received an undue share of international attention. "The US role is more indirect this time. They are exerting influence through foreign workers in the election commission."

The Independent Election Commission, IEC, has overall responsibility for the conduct of the elections.

Zia Ahmad Zia, head of Herat's election commission, strongly denied that internationals were influencing the IEC's work.

"Foreigners are only providing technical assistance," he said. "We are the real organisers of these elections, and we will conduct them accurately and in accordance with the law. It is the people's vote that will choose the next president."

It is not just Afghan voters who fear that foreign interference could skew the elections.

"The international community is ... taking unhelpful actions," wrote Khalilzad, the former US envoy, in an op-ed piece for the Financial Times. "While ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) and the UN are playing crucial roles in providing security and meeting the logistical needs of the elections, some officials are taking inappropriate partisan positions."

But political analyst Abdul Matin dismisses these kinds of statements as "poisonous propaganda". On August 20, he will cast his ballot and he hopes that his fellow Herat citizens will also do their civic duty.

"We should use our votes to bring peace and rebuild the country," he said. "Nobody, not even the foreigners, can weaken the vote of the people."

Mohammad Shafi Firozi is an IWPR trainee in Herat.

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