

## Afghan Election Raises The Bar

BBC - 22/09/2005

By Ahmed Rashid

Guest journalist and writer Ahmed Rashid reflects in his latest column for the BBC News website on Sunday's parliamentary and provincial elections in Afghanistan.

Imagine standing in an election in which candidates have no idea of their role, responsibility or powers once they are elected.

That was the case for the thousands of Afghan candidates - one quarter of them women - who stood for 430 seats on the 34 provincial councils because the election law was only published three weeks ago.

So it was not surprising that ahead of the polls, the law had not been read by most candidates.

But despite the chaos, the elections were still a historic milestone, the culmination of the political process inaugurated by the Bonn agreement signed in December 2001 between the victorious Afghan factions who helped the West defeat the Taleban.

### Heroic efforts

Every major step - a new constitution, presidential elections - has been monitored by the United Nations and endorsed by the international community giving it unparalleled legitimacy.

Despite the glitches Afghans, better known for street fighting than street politics, have taken to elections like ducks to water.

Their enthusiasm was palpable. The countryside was festooned with posters of the 6,000 candidates, and even attacks by the Taleban - killing ordinary civilians for carrying voter ID cards - did not deter the population.

Stories of individual electoral heroism are just as moving as the sacrifices made by the Afghans whilst fighting the former Soviet Union in the 1980s or the Taleban in the 1990s.

Hundreds of women bravely defied custom to stand and campaign in a predominantly male environment.

However public expectations from the elections were also running high - far too high given the lack of resources available. The days after the elections will bring enormous uncertainty as to the future of this country.

### Off the radar

Afghanistan, once home to al-Qaeda and now home to a resurgent Taleban movement and heroin production that provides 87% of the world market should have remained top of the international agenda but it has not.

For two years the crisis in Iraq has sucked the oxygen out of Afghanistan. Now Hurricane Katrina has only added to the loss of attention and resources.

The West's commitment of resources and military manpower to protect this fledgling democracy, which is still the third poorest and least developed country in the world has been far too little.

Now it appears to many Afghans that with a job just half done, the West is now seeking an exit door.

Recently US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld let it be known that he wanted to pull out up to a quarter of the 20,000 US troops in Afghanistan over the next six months.

The American drawdown would supposedly be filled by Nato which maintains a separate 11,000-strong peace keeping force in the country, while the Americans do the fighting.

The American and Nato commands are supposed to merge next spring, but major Nato countries such as France and Germany are refusing to carry out combat or counter insurgency operations against the Taliban under a merged command.

"Over time it would be nice if Nato developed counterinsurgency capabilities, which don't exist at the moment," a heavily sarcastic Mr Rumsfeld told a recent Nato meeting in Berlin.

### **Karzai's problem**

Increasingly worried as to who would maintain the peace next year President Hamid Karzai urged that after the elections, "the international community should not immediately think Afghanistan's work has been done and its over", and just go home.

Afghanistan still needs to be protected by the West and given more money.

Four years after 11 September not a single new power station has been built and rebuilding the major road arteries has just begun.

Ask any Afghan why he voted and his reply invariably is he is that four years on he is still hoping for change and to see the benefits of the end of the Taliban regime.

However Mr Karzai has also failed to generate the spirit of nation building.

After winning presidential elections last October he was supposed to deal toughly with warlords, drug dealers and criminals.

Instead in order to shore up his own position he has refused to move against them, despite overwhelming evidence that that is what the public wants.

Not a single warlord or drugs dealer has faced a trial or sentencing.

A fledgling army, police, justice system and bureaucracy is being trained at Western expense, but President Karzai's immediate team offers little example in the way of sacrifice and service that could inspire these institutions or the nation.

Those candidates who do get elected are likely to be angry and frustrated. The new parliament, rather than being a venue for discussing development goals, could become an overheated venue for anti-Karzai criticism.

Mr Karzai still has the time and public goodwill to rediscover the vision he had for his nation in the aftermath of the Taliban defeat.

Ultimately only a renewed Western commitment rather than withdrawal will give the Afghans the confidence to tackle their horrendous list of problems and encourage them to push ahead with nation building.