

Karzai Looks To Rebuild A Nation

Final results won't be available for many days, but it appears that Hamid Karzai has easily won the race to become Afghanistan's first elected president. Now he must work to heal a fractious nation without conceding too much to power-hungry warlords

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By Ahmed Rashid / Kabul

As dawn broke on October 9, thousands of Afghans began to gather at polling stations around the country to cast their votes for a new president and the first legally sanctioned government in the country since 1973. For most Afghans it was the first time they had ever seen a ballot box. "Afghans have been waiting for this moment of empowerment for years," President Hamid Karzai told reporters, as the polls closed after a two-hour extension to allow everyone to vote.

Although the polling was marred by significant irregularities and subsequent protests by some of the 15 opposition presidential candidates, the massive turnout—estimated by the United Nations at 70%-80%—placed Afghanistan at the forefront of representative new democracies, not to mention earning a position as one of the few Muslim countries in the region where leaders have been freely elected. "Despite the problems, the elections will have a profound impact on the region," says a Western ambassador. (See related article on page 16.) Especially significant, the Taliban and Al Qaeda failed to carry out pledges to disrupt the polls, signalling that one of Islamic terrorism's former breeding grounds may be turning toward peace.

Collecting and counting the votes will take between two and three weeks, but close observers of the election have little doubt that Karzai will secure the 51% vote needed to avoid a run-off election and become president for the next five years.

An election victory is only the beginning of Karzai's challenges. One key task will be to establish a legitimate, representative government that wins broad support from a fractious Afghanistan without relying too heavily on powerful warlords. It's a tall order, but the relative success of the election gives hope that Karzai is up to it. Speaking to the Review before the vote, Karzai said that if elected his new "government will be efficient, clean and patriotic like hell and will reflect the whole country and the whole Afghan nation." He said he would not form a coalition with warlords or allow them to set conditions on his reforms.

The enthusiasm of Afghans for the election was visible both before and during the vote. Before the election, 10.5 million Afghans registered to vote; another 1.5 million registered in refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran. And on election day, the excitement at several of the polling stations visited by the Review in Kabul and the Shomali valley north of the city was obvious despite heavy security and fears of Taliban attacks. Contrary to expectations, women turned out in large numbers, even in areas where resident Pashtun tribes are deeply conservative. Many women across the country were expected to vote for Karzai. "Karzai is the only person to fly the white bird of peace, the other candidates are just warlords," said Mehbooba, a young teacher, as she voted in Kabul.

The fact that the elections were mostly violence-free was partially due to the massive deployment of some 80,000 troops and police from Afghan security and militia forces, the 19,000-strong United States-led coalition forces and the 9,000-strong Nato-led peacekeeping force in Kabul. United States Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad praised the performance of the Afghan security forces, who had arrested over 100 extremists trying to smuggle in rockets and explosives.

The election was not free of controversy. Serious discrepancies led to an initial boycott by 14 of 15 opposition candidates. Intimidation by warlords and multiple voting by Afghans who had acquired more than one voter-registration card were noted by national and international monitoring groups, who nevertheless declared the result to be valid. At some polling stations, local officials did not use indelible ink intended to mark voters' fingers to prevent them voting more than once. Some officials apparently mixed up two kinds of ink and used the wrong one to mark voters' thumbs.

Opposition candidates jumped on the issue to call for a halt to the elections. "Today's election is not a legitimate election, we are not part of today's election," presidential candidate and opposition spokesman Abdul Sitar Serat told

hundreds of reporters halfway through polling day. Within hours, Western ambassadors met the candidates to try to effect a compromise, while Karzai called upon all Afghans to accept the results. “Millions of people have voted and we all have to accept the results—that’s how it is all over the world,” Karzai told the Review.

One of three particularly influential opposition contenders, Mohammed Mohaqeq, the Hazara warlord from central Afghanistan, quickly accepted a United Nations-offered compromise on the vote: Set up an independent investigative commission to investigate irregularities. Younus Qanooni, a former education minister for Karzai, a Tajik leader of the former Northern Alliance and probably the strongest of Karzai’s opponents, accepted the compromise two days after the vote. Other candidates were expected to follow suit.

Claims put to the test

Karzai, a Pashtun, cannot afford to alienate opponents who represent major non-Pashtun ethnic groups. “Every warlord, ethnic group, tribe wants to test their actual support in these elections. Tall claims have been made by everyone for past 25 years; now we will know the truth,” says retired Gen. Attiquallah Barylai, Qanooni’s campaign manager.

Karzai and Western diplomats say the election should help Western and Afghan intelligence efforts to encourage senior, moderate Taliban leaders to return home from Pakistan. “The elections are a major step in encouraging many Taliban to realize that the best approach is to enter the political process,” says Francesc Vendrell, the European Union’s ambassador to Afghanistan. The next test for whether that approach is successful may come next year: Parliamentary elections will be held in April 2005.

In the end, the elections were imperfect, but they represent a significant step forward in stabilizing the country. Says UN Special Representative Jean Arnault: “This election shows an accelerated transition from the rule of the gun to something else, which is not full democracy but empowers people to take decisions.”