

Afghan

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By Ahmed Rashid

KABUL—Millions of Afghans voted Saturday in the country's first presidential elections in a remarkably violence-free environment, as Taliban and al Qaeda extremists failed to fulfill their pledge to disrupt the polls.

The voting was marred by several irregularities, which led 14 of the 15 candidates running against President Hamid Karzai initially to refuse to recognize the results of the polls. On Sunday, however, one of those opposition candidates said he would respect the results of a United Nations investigation into the irregularities, following negotiations between Western diplomats, envoys of Mr. Karzai and the opposition. As negotiations continued, other candidates were expected to follow suit.

Many Afghans reacted angrily to the boycott, saying the opposition candidates were trying to derail the creation of a legitimate government. It was just one sign of the enthusiasm with which voters embraced the election, in which U.N. officials estimated turnout was 70% to 80% of registered voters, based on rough counts from U.N. offices around the country.

"I have lived nearly a century but I have never voted for my leader," said 93-year-old Abdul Hakim, who arrived on crutches one hour early at a polling station in north Kabul.

Saturday's relatively peaceful elections marked a major step forward in stabilizing Afghanistan and exposed the lack of public support for the Taliban militia, which has been waging a guerrilla war since U.S.-led attacks ousted the Taliban in 2001. The rebels managed a smattering of deadly assaults around the country on election day, but they took the biggest hit in a clash with U.S. and Afghan forces in the south.

The inability of terrorists to disrupt the polls amid a massive security drive is a major victory for the Karzai government and U.S. forces. Mr. Karzai and Western diplomats said this would encourage efforts underway to bring back several moderate Taliban leaders under an amnesty program from their refuge in Pakistan.

"I am happy," Mr. Karzai told reporters after the close of voting Saturday. "Afghans have been waiting for this moment of empowerment for years." Official results aren't expected for about two weeks because of the difficulties in collecting and counting votes from around a country that still has little infrastructure. But Mr. Karzai, Afghanistan's interim president since December 2001, was the front-runner, and was widely expected to win more than 51% of the vote, the amount he needs to avoid a runoff with his nearest opponent.

The high voter turnout is also a boost to U.S. President George W. Bush, who has cited free Afghan elections as an example of success in the war against terrorism. The Afghan elections have become even more important to marking progress amid the possibility that deteriorating security in Iraq could force postponement of January elections there.

Should Mr. Karzai be declared the winner, the initial boycott by the opposition candidates could actually strengthen Mr. Karzai's hands in forming his next cabinet. Western diplomats are taking the lead in pressuring the opposition to back down, which frees Mr. Karzai from having to make deals with them when appointing cabinet posts. Some of his opponents are the leaders of armed factions, or warlords—a group that Mr. Karzai said in an interview last week he wouldn't allow to set conditions on his agenda.

Since the fall of the Taliban, several warlords—who played a big role in ousting that regime—have aggressively set conditions for their cooperation with Kabul. During the past few months, however, Mr. Karzai has reduced the power of two prominent warlords—Defense Minister Mohammed Fahim and Ismail Khan, the governor of the western province of Herat.

His new cabinet, Mr. Karzai said, would be made up of "technocrats and educated Afghans who can deliver services to the people." He said his priorities would be dealing with drug trafficking, reforming institutions and spreading the government's authority and development projects to the country's 34 provinces.

The opposition boycott was triggered by the fact that at some polling stations officials didn't use indelible ink to mark voters' fingers, a process set up to prevent people from voting twice. Instead, they used the ink for stamping ballot papers. At one polling station, officials using the wrong ink changed immediately to the right ink when an international observer pointed out the mistake.

Opposition candidates jumped on the issue to call for a halt to the elections. "Any government that comes into power as a result of today's election has no credibility, no validity and is illegitimate for us," said presidential candidate and opposition spokesman Abdul Sitar Serat.

The U.N. and the Afghan government's Joint Election Management Board said the ink problem had occurred at a few polling stations and had been corrected by midday. The election board refused to cancel the polling.

While the refusal of opposition candidates to accept the vote's legitimacy could hamper the victor's ability to govern, such an outcome appeared unlikely Sunday. U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, U.N. Special Representative Jean Arnault and European Union representative Francesc Vendrell worked through the weekend trying to persuade the leading opposition figures to relent. Also on Sunday, electoral director Farooq Wardak said an independent commission would be set up to investigate the irregularities. The commission could call for repolling in some scattered districts.

The investigation offers opposition candidates a way to step back from the boycott. "They're looking for a way out without losing face," one Western diplomat said. On Sunday ethnic Hazara candidate Mohammed Mohaqeq said he would accept the result of an investigation into the irregularities. So did the only woman candidate, Massooda Jalal, who hadn't joined the boycott. Other candidates were expected to follow suit in coming days, including the most prominent opposition candidate, Yunus Qanooni, a former education minister and a Tajik leader of the Northern Alliance that fought the Taliban.