

Democracy as Theatre: The 2014 Presidential Elections in Afghanistan

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DARREN ATKINSON, AUG 12 2014

Saturday, June 14th 2014, saw voting take place in the second round election run-off between the final two candidates for President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan: Dr. Abdullah Abdullah and Dr. Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai. In the first round, neither had been able to secure the required 50%, so a run-off was required. The second round results were initially counted and Ghani was said to have won with 56.44% of the votes, with Abdullah taking 43.56%. After allegations of irregularities, including ballot box stuffing (referred to as “stuffed sheep” in recordings released by Abdullah’s camp), the US Secretary of State John Kerry brokered a deal that would see 100% of the votes recounted in order to find an outright winner and a form of power-sharing to be established once the recount had been conducted. At the time of writing, we are still awaiting the outcome of the recount. Election coverage initially provided an optimistic, if cautious, counterpoint to the regular negative media attention paid to Afghanistan. Successful administering of democratic elections and a peaceful “transfer of power” was seen to highlight the potential for a future of peace and political progress. This article will argue that, far from representing an optimistic development for the future, the recent elections, and their subsequent political wrangling, represent a continuation of the same corrupt power structures and elite decision makers that have dominated the landscape of Afghanistan for many years.

In order to argue the points made above, the article will be split into three main sections. The first will critically analyse the political compact enshrined by the 2001 Bonn Agreement in order to argue that, far from representing a broad collective of political actors, the current system has institutionalised the rule of existing elites by offering democratic legitimacy to political figures almost indistinguishable from those that previously wrought havoc on Afghanistan during the 1990s. The second will question the assumptions that underpin the idea that voting is, in and of itself, evidence of political progress, and will claim that the almost sole focus on the “democratic process” fetishizes a bureaucratic process at the expense of deeper considerations regarding the current political system of Afghanistan. The final section will look at the 2014 election and will argue that the policy and ideological differences between the two candidates in the elections are limited to little more than platitudes, and that what is taking place provides evidence of a discord between interlinked and fluid power elites that were entrenched and institutionalised by the Bonn Agreement.

Constructing an Institutional Framework: Afghanistan and the Bonn Agreement

After the Taliban were removed from power by the US and its allies in 2001, it was vital for the occupying powers, and their Afghan clients, to establish a political framework through which the country could be organised and governed. This strategic need led to the establishment of the Afghan Interim Administration (AIA) in 2001, chaired by Hamid Karzai. The AIA provided an administrative foundation for the most important governance project of the post-Taliban era: the International Conference on Afghanistan, Bonn (2001), and the corresponding Bonn Agreement. Bonn is the foundational document on which the political framework of the post-Taliban government has been based, although it was not a peace agreement but ‘merely a statement of general goals and intended power sharing’ (Suhrke *et al.*, 2002: 877). Bonn called for two key administrative policies: the establishment of an Emergency *Loya Jirga* (Grand Council) within six months to establish a Transitional Authority, and a Constitutional *Loya Jirga* to be convened within 18 months in order to establish a new constitution based on the principles of the constitution of 1964

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from the time of King Zahir Shah (United Nations, 2001). The Bonn Conference, and the initial stages of the imposition of an administrative framework, appears to have been undertaken in a vacuum from the people of Afghanistan. It was organised and sponsored by foreign governments, under the auspices of the UN, with participants selected according to vague and uncertain terms. Bonn was an elite-led process that did not accurately represent the diverse class, political, or ethnic complexity of Afghanistan. Perhaps most telling, if unsurprising, was the failure to include any representatives of democratic or progressive groups, even though some were invited before having their invitations revoked a day before the start of the conference.

In June 2002, the Emergency *Loya Jirga* was held in Kabul and selected Hamid Karzai to become President under the Afghan Transitional Administration (ATA), which was to run until the first Presidential Elections in 2004. It was at this juncture that the division between the two main powerbrokers of the post-Bonn era can begin to be seen. Writing after the 2009 elections, Sharan and Heathershaw (2011: 298) noted that Afghans were offered a choice between the 'former Northern Alliance (NA) Jihadis, in particular the Panjesheri in *Shura-yi Nezar*, the military wing of the *Jamiat Tanzim*, represented by Dr Abdullah Abdullah' and the 'post-Bonn Western-educated technocratic elites who were brought in from outside the country'. Looking at the make-up of the ATA, and the first government of President Karzai in 2004, it appears that this division was institutionalised through the Bonn Agreement as a way to restore the power of elites removed from power by the Taleban in 1996, as well as to provide Western-educated technocrats with a political opportunity. It had become clear that ex-King Zahir Shah, and other less-important royalists, would have limited importance in the new system, and that democratic and left-wing political movements would also be marginalised. The choices available for the Afghan elections of 2004, 2009, and 2014 provide evidence that a decision was taken to construct a system of government built around a monarchic and highly centralised presidency, and a powerful political and economic elite. In addition, this system essentially outlawed functioning political parties built around secular ideology through incorporating a caveat that no parties can be formed 'contrary to the provisions of [the] sacred religion of Islam', but also limited religious movements whose ideas are built around an 'Islamic school of thought' (Constitution of Afghanistan, 2004, Chapter 35, Ch.2, Art. 14). These caveats do not relate to the political system being rooted to a particular form of Islam, but, in their ambiguity, highlight how Bonn institutionalised restrictions on political movements, Islamic or secular, that originated outside of the chosen elites invited to participate in the conference.

The centralised presidential system, restriction on political parties, and dominance of competing political elites has had a hugely limiting effect on Afghan democracy. However, it is the structural flaws of the occupation and its institutional framework that have truly limited Afghans' ability to build a more representative system of government. Since 2001, Afghan elites, and their foreign patrons, have presided over a system built on endemic corruption and liberalised capitalism with, at best, lax regulatory systems. For example, the Kabul Bank scandal, where one of Afghanistan's largest banks was run as a Ponzi scheme for the benefit of Afghan elites, highlights the level of corruption that linked family members close to President Karzai, Vice President Fahim, and other powerbrokers. Also, according to US cables released by WikiLeaks and published by *The Guardian*, former Vice President Ahmad Zia Massoud was stopped in Dubai carrying \$52 million, before being let on his way without describing where this money had originated or where it was going. Corruption in Afghanistan is, however, not limited to Afghans, or to an underlying dishonesty of Afghans, but is the direct result of the structural conditions of occupation that have enabled such behaviour to take place. The World Bank (2012: 29) described how, of the billions that have been spent in Afghanistan,

Most aid (both civilian aid and security assistance)... has a low domestic economic content, limiting its impact on the economy. *Much either never comes in or flows directly out* through contracting international providers of goods and services, imports, and the expatriation of profits' (my emphasis).

While the removal of civilian and security "assistance" from Afghanistan might not be direct corruption, it provides evidence of the structural economic conditions that have helped create a rapid flow of capital in and out of Afghanistan. Further examples of the structural nature of corruption are presented by the work of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR); an organisation that has spent years documenting the fraud of reconstruction contractors. Both the World Bank and SIGAR highlight how the occupation created the conditions for elites connected to the highest levels of political power to seek ways to profit from the seemingly

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unregulated flow of an unprecedented amount of capital into Afghanistan. In 2012, it was estimated by Anthony Cordesman (2012: 3) of the Center for Strategic & International Studies that up to \$641.7 billion has been spent by the US government on its Afghanistan mission and yet, according to the 2014 UNDP Human Development Report, Afghanistan still sits at 169th place (around the same as Haiti and Djibouti) on its Human Development Index. Life for most Afghans has barely improved since 2001, with workers in the city often reliant on irregular, unsafe day labour, and those in the countryside reliant on low-level agricultural work. It is clear that the US-led occupation has created a flawed political system where elites, both foreign and Afghan, have become entrenched in corruption, semi-legal and illegal activities. As such, analysts should express serious reservations about a process that enables leaders to further entrench their status through becoming “democratically elected”, bearing in mind the system has been created by internal and external elites that have shown little concern, other than rhetorical, for the needs of a majority of Afghan citizens who continue to live amidst some of the lowest socio-economic conditions in the world.

Fetishization of a Bureaucratic Process

Images of Afghans with ink-stained fingers littered social and mainstream media in the immediate aftermath of the first round of elections in Afghanistan. Pictures such as these represent hope for a people that have suffered from violence and poverty for too long – it is impossible not to be struck by the strength of these photographic representations of liberty, freedom, and progress. However, these images also portray a highly debatable notion to their audience: that voting is an *a priori* positive development that naturally brings about progressive change. In essence, what has taken place represents something akin to a *fetishization of a bureaucratic process*; where a highly visible, yet technical, function of a liberal democracy, such as voting in elections, is utilised as *prima facie* evidence that progress has been achieved. This is a highly problematic representation when used by foreign media and governments in countries that have been occupied, as it provides a powerful visual example of “success” and “progress” that can often limit critical coverage. These images also provide a key tool for leaders to justify their policies and, as such, have enabled President Obama to ignore the dubious political settlement by offering his congratulations to ‘the millions of Afghans who enthusiastically participated in today’s historic elections, which promise to usher in the first democratic transfer of power in Afghanistan’s history’. Exactly why a transfer of power in a democratic election is so important to millions of Afghans does not need to be elaborated on. In the discourse of western liberal elites, the process of democratic transfer of power itself is what’s important; the issue of who power has transferred to, or whether any social or economic progress will be forthcoming, are noticeable by their absence. The ‘international community’, as Lafraie (2011: 471) writes, ‘pushes for democracy as if it were the panacea for all the ills of post-conflict societies’. The terms of what an Afghan democracy will look like, other than the implementation of elections, is rarely elaborated on, with watchers of Afghanistan encouraged to rejoice at the sight of burka-clad women voting for people they have little connection to and whose policies, if their past is anything to go by, are unlikely to improve their material conditions. This is democracy in reverse – the idea that voting is the first stage of a politically active society is in contravention to what is understood about political developments that took place across other parts of the world, whereby revolution and dissent against authority led to the formation of political movements and, eventually, political outcomes that benefited a wide-variety of citizens (see, for example, the work of Christopher Hill in relation to the English Civil War).

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Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, a close associate and advisor to famed Mujahedeen commander Ahmad Shah Massoud during the 1980s and 90s, was Foreign Minister of Afghanistan between 2001 and 2005. In 2009, he was the main opposition figure to Karzai and, while questioning the legitimacy of the election, he eventually conceded, citing his belief that a free and fair election was impossible and, as such, Karzai was re-elected unopposed. In the run-off of 2014, Abdullah secured the apparent support of three first-round candidates: Agha Sherzai (Kandahari Pashtun; ex-Mujahedeen), Abdul Rab Rassul Sayyaf (Islamist Paghmani Pashtun; ex-Mujahedeen), and Zalmay Rassoul (Pashtun Royalist and Karzai’s most recent Foreign Minister), all of whom are heavily connected to either the corruption of the current regime or to the crimes of the past. During the election process, Abdullah failed to outline exactly what his policies or ideology amount to. For example, he regularly spoke in generic terms such as: ‘It’s not that we [need to] have a stronger national army, strong police. [When we speak about strength], we mean ‘stronger’ in terms of legitimacy. The more the trust of the people [in] the state and its institutions, the weaker the opposition’.

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Paragraph 9 of the Declaration of the National Coalition of Afghanistan (*Etelaf-e Milli*), Abdullah's political group, calls for policies that benefit 'the well-being of citizens, [through] launching effective programs to reduce poverty... [as well as placing] emphasis on agricultural development'. Exactly what these policies would entail is not expanded on and, if these statements are to be taken at face value, they appear to be free from any form of ideological coherence and lack any basis in explaining how, and for whom, his government would implement these policies or how these changes would truly benefit Afghans.

Dr. Ashraf Ghani, a former US-based academic and World Bank technocrat, was Finance Minister of Afghanistan between 2002 and 2004 under President Karzai. He ran for President in 2009, but failed to gain much support, placing only fourth in the first round. Ghani is also campaigning with remnants of the generation that wrought havoc on Afghanistan. General Dostum, a man known for his rapid ability to change allegiance (he was aligned with the "communist" government for much of the 1980s before rebelling), is his main vice presidential candidate. Dostum, while a key component of the NA, has never been a natural ally of the Jamiat or Tajik elites and, as the main Uzbek community powerbroker, he offered Ghani a chance to increase his likely voters beyond the Pashtuns and urban intellectuals who were seen as his key support base. In addition, Ghani has gained the support of the *Hezb-e Islami Shura*, another group whose members were heavily involved in the atrocities that took place in the 1990s and, after what seems to be a *Jamiat* power struggle, with ex-Vice President Ahmad Zia Massoud – someone, as mentioned above, heavily linked to corruption. Ghani has campaigned under the rubric of the bureaucratic reformer declaring, in a 2014 interview with the Afghanistan Analysts Network's Kate Clark, 'One thing is crystal clear. This country wants reform'. What this "reform" entails beyond technical changes to the process of government is not made clear. Exactly how these reforms, likely, due to Ghani's impeccable World Bank credentials, to involve continued large-scale free market reforms, will bring any real change to a majority of Afghans is overlooked in favour of sound bites that link him to the "international community" of respected leaders. Ghani has also failed to discuss how his role as a senior member of the elite that helped formulate the Bonn framework that brought back the old guard of 'Abdullah, Mohaqeq, Fahim, Dostum, Karzai... Khalili', a political elite inextricably linked to corruption and political violence, constitutes "reform" on any level beyond the merely technical.

Representations of the 2014 Presidential Elections that have focused on the "democratic" process of voting for either Dr. Abdullah or Dr. Ghani have obfuscated the reality of the political and economic structure of Afghanistan, and fail to examine the fact that the "choice" offered to the Afghan people has changed little since the establishment of the AIA in 2001. The two interlinked and amorphous groups who competed for power in 2004 and 2009 are once again competing for the spoils of power in 2014, with Abdullah being the favoured candidate of the former NA/Jamiat/Tajik elites and Ghani, replacing incumbent President Hamid Karzai, being the favoured candidate of the technocratic elite that established power after Bonn. The democratic choice offered to Afghans throughout the US-led occupation is little more than democracy as theatre, a charade used to provide democratic legitimacy to individuals that represent the continuation of the same elites that have dominated Afghan politics, both inside and outside the country, since the early 1990s. Both candidates fail to offer anything resembling choice when it comes to ideology, policy, or personnel, with both Abdullah and Ghani content to seek the support and patronage of individuals steeped in previous acts of political violence and the economic corruption of the Bonn framework.

Conclusion

Afghanistan in 2014 is not remarkably different from the country seen in 2001, when the Taliban were removed, or, for that matter, 1992, when the "communist" People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan finally lost power. Some rebuilding has taken place and, for the time being, a political framework exists through which Afghan elites manage to govern the country. However, despite the billions of dollars spent and many lives lost, it would take an advocate of the occupation of the highest disingenuousness to suggest that progress has been anything other than "modest" at best. As this article has tried to highlight, the current system should not be seen as the only choice available to Afghanistan. An elite political compact, based around external support for meaningless elections, is not the only possible solution to the myriad problems that lie in wait for any future government. Even in the most limited understanding of democracy, what has been seen in 2004, 2009, and now 2014 would not be described as anything remotely resembling a functioning democratic system. The Afghan Presidential Elections of 2014 were not designed to improve the lives of Afghans; they were merely a bureaucratic process through which the Afghan people have

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been “allowed” to select which member of the two interlinked and fluid competing elites they would best like to run the country, regardless of the fact that their ideologies and policies differ very little. Leaving the future of Afghanistan to the will of existing elites should be challenged and questioned by anyone who believes that Afghans should be supported to fight for something significantly more inclusive, just, and democratic.

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