

The Afghan Elections: An Afghan Awakening

Written by Robert Mihara

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ROBERT MIHARA, APR 30 2014

By any standard, the Afghan national elections have been a remarkable manifestation of political and social consciousness. They revealed the depth and breadth of changes that have occurred in Afghanistan over the past several decades as well as their fragility with scenes of excited Afghans at polling stations juxtaposed with episodes of violence. Given the contrasts, policymakers in the international community should consider carefully the implications of the elections and the challenges and opportunities they offer.

Despite threats from the Taliban and inclement weather, millions of Afghan voters showed up at polling sites to make their mark. Crowds in several locations compelled the Afghan Independent Election Commission (IEC) to extend the voting window into the evening to permit those still waiting in line to vote. By midday, stirring anecdotes were already filtering in of elderly men making their way to voting boxes and weeping in the emotion of the moment, of voters returning after their voting site had been bombed, and so on. For the brave individuals who voted, it was about more than picking the candidate based on policy, ethnicity, or religion, although those characteristics were undoubtedly part of their specific ballot choices. The vote was fundamentally a rejection of endemic war and an aspiration to peace and prosperity for future generations. The Afghan people are tired of death and of despairing for their children's future. [i]

Afghans defiantly claiming their future might, by itself, merely be inspiring for some Western policymakers, but the Afghan vote represents more than a bold act by individuals. It could very well be the first indications of a nascent political awakening. If so, the 2014 elections offer a fleeting opportunity to cement substantive and enduring change in the Afghan body politic that no incumbent ruling elite, mired in patronage politics, or violent jihadist organizations can obstruct. Much as with the fall of the Taliban, the international community has an opportunity to capitalize on the willing suspension of disbelief amongst Afghans to accomplish now what foreign assistance could only hope to facilitate but never achieve – creating a unified nation-state at peace with itself.

A political awakening in Afghanistan would signify a true generational move that stood on the willing shoulders of war-scarred generations who came of age during the coups of the 1970s and crushing internecine wars that followed the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. These generations have experienced the subversion and progressive dismantlement of tribal structures that reduced the traditional governance structure to only a shadow of what it had been, subject to the whims of warlords and foreign-backed violent jihadist groups. The urban members of these generations are likewise veterans of heartbreak. For them, it has been the promise of Islamic modernity that has always appeared over an impassable horizon, stolen by forces beyond their control before a world that had lost interest in Afghanistan's future. NATO's transition this year holds out the possibility of writing a different narrative for Afghans. [ii]

As in 1989, the Afghan state will depend on foreign aid to maintain itself. Unlike the post-Soviet era, however, Afghans are much better prepared in 2014 to advance politically and socially than they had been in 1979 when the Red Army launched their ill-fated intervention. This has as much to do with the generational dynamics that fomented the Arab Spring as the positive work that NATO has done in partnership with other contributing nations. The rising generation of Afghans desires a materially better future for themselves that rescues their families from the oppression of perpetual conflict. The cumulative effect of international commitments and indigenous initiatives has fostered a tangible sense of opportunity that is unprecedented in modern Afghanistan. The conviction that peace and prosperity are attainable in their lifetimes was a principal basis for the wave of unrest that swept North Africa and the Middle

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East during the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, and so it has been in the Afghan spring of 2014. [iii]

It is, however, important to keep the April vote in perspective. The election enthusiasm itself is ephemeral. One should not mistake the turnout at the voting booth to be the culmination of a populist moment sweeping the whole of Afghanistan. Deep divisions continue to divide the population and threaten the viability of state institutions, and the institutions themselves have not yet proven their ability to serve the will of the people. Yet, the persistence of such obstacles does not nullify the potential revealed by the strong participation of Afghans in the 2014 elections. Afghan voters have embraced Afghanistan's extant institutions as a first step towards the future that they desire. Theirs is an ambition hardened by the very threat of death that violent jihadists had meant as deterrence. Afghans have spoken through the election, announcing to all that they will not fear what they have already lived. Cornered into choosing between the certainty of the Taliban's dogma and the uncertainty of democracy, individuals from Kandahar to Mazar-e-Sharif have chosen the hope of democracy. In Kandahar City, historically a Taliban stronghold, one brave 60-year-old farmer stepped forward to vote, declaring that "I want change and a good government and I am asking the man I am going to elect as the next president to bring an end to the suffering of this war." [iv]

It is the bankruptcy of the Taliban message in the eyes of many Afghans that offers a positive portend of an attainable future. The message from foreign donors, however, indicates that the international community either dismisses the relevance of such a political shift amongst many Afghans or that few of them have considered its full implications. Donor states remain committed to tying their fiscal and security assistance to select prerequisites, or "indicators," outlined in the 2012 Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework (or "Tokyo Framework") that the Afghan government must meet or see its funding end. While the Tokyo Framework is a logical forcing function for the state-building agenda of donor states, it also does so based on priorities that are foreign to Afghan political-social realities. The United States has done more to emphasize its expectation for transparency and gender equality than it has for reassuring the Afghan voters through reasonable *quid pro quo* pledges of financial and material assistance. [v]

If this has in fact been a true moment of political awakening, it would be time for leading donor states, such as the United States, to reconsider the stipulations of the Tokyo Framework against the possibilities of what might be accomplished at a reasonable cost. It is likely true that qualifying conditions for continuing aid to the Government of Afghanistan are necessary as a basis for trust between the Afghan Government and its benefactors. These caveats help to ensure that Afghan elites honor the interests of their people against the imperatives of patronage that have so long defined political decision-making and bureaucratic behavior. Such requisite thresholds should not, however, be fixed such that they do not permit Afghans to contend amongst themselves for the right path to a better peace. The ambition to establish a prosperous Afghan civil society delivered from endemic violence, with equality under the law and transparency in governance, will require time and forbearance on the part of donor states. Americans might have forgotten that Tammany Hall and the machine politics of their own nineteenth century could not have been solved by a foreign accountability framework *à la* Tokyo 2012. It was the reaction of civil society during the Progressivist Era that forced an evolution of governance and social relationships which curbed the excesses of political patronage and graft. Foreign-based imperatives might have accelerated the reforms of the late-1800s and early-1900s, but it is just as likely that they would have disrupted the indigenous American reforms that made the changes deep and lasting. The international community should consider to what degree they are enabling and hindering the Afghanistan they have avowedly committed themselves to create. [vi]

There have been a number of missed opportunities since 2001 to put into place enduring foundations for a stable and unified Afghanistan. The lost years between the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001 and 2006, before the US first committed significant forces to Afghanistan, ceded critical time for the Taliban to gather their strength and burned precious political capital in the United States. The principal period of the surge in American forces to Afghanistan from 2009 to 2011, likewise, witnessed the squandering of scarce resources and public confidence by frittering away human capital and funds through discrete initiatives that focused more on parochial agendas than on achieving necessary and enduring outcomes in Afghanistan. The benign neglect of those years failed to live up to the hopes of many Afghans, but lightly esteeming the 2014 Afghan vote could very well be the cruelest of disappointments. Having seen the fork in the road post-Operation Enduring Freedom, Afghans have made their voices heard in the clearest way available to them. It is now up to world leaders to determine whether their praise of this demonstration of will should beget a deeper responsibility on their part in determining whether the aspirations of

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Afghans shall crash upon the rocks of history or sail into safer harbors.

The views expressed here are the author's alone and do not reflect those of the US Army, US Department of Defense, or any other organization of the US Government.

[i] R. Nordland, A. Ahmed, and M. Rosenberg, "Afghan Turnout is High as Voters Defy the Taliban," *New York Times* (5 April 2014): http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/06/world/asia/afghanistan-voting.html?_r=1 [accessed 18 March 2014].

[ii] B. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*, 2nd edition (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 2002), ix-x, 19-21

[iii] M. Hoffman and A. Jamal, "The Youth and the Arab Spring: Cohort Differences and Similarities," *Middle East Law and Governance* 4 (2012): 184-86.

[iv] "Afghan Turnout is High as Voters Defy the Taliban"; J. Partlow and K. Sieff, "Afghan voters defy Taliban, casting ballots for new president on relatively peaceful day," *Washington Post* (5 April 2014): http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/afghan-voters-defy-taliban-cast-their-ballots-for-a-new-president-regional-councils/2014/04/05/c092f260-bc7b-11e3-96ae-f2c36d2b1245_story.html; "Afghanistan: un scrutin réussi à Kandahar, ancienne capitale des talibans," *Agence France-Press* (5 April 2014): <http://www.afp.com/fr/node/2257563> [accessed 20 April 2014]; and K. Sieff, "Afghanistan's presidential election got high turnout, but many still voted along ethnic lines," *Washington Post* (6 April 2014): http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/afghanistans-presidential-election-got-high-turnout-but-many-still-voted-along-ethnic-lines/2014/04/06/6b3a6a1e-bdb6-11e3-b195-dd0c1174052c_story.html [accessed 20 April 2014].

[v] *Chicago Summit Declaration on Afghanistan*, 21 May 2012, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-E5036B2C-B98813A4/natolive/official_texts_87595.htm [accessed 18 April 2014]; *Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework*, 8 July 2012, <http://www.khaama.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Tokyo-Conference-Declaration.pdf> [accessed 18 March 2014].

[vi] M. Shefter, "Regional Receptivity to Reform: The Legacy of the Progressive Era," *Political Science Quarterly* 98 (Fall 1983): 463, 465-68, and 483.

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