

Impressions from Kunduz after the 2014 Afghanistan Elections

Written by Obaid Ali

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OBAID ALI, MAY 27 2014

Election Day in Kunduz ran relatively smoothly. Male and female participation were unexpectedly high, with threats by the Taliban largely failing to prevent the people from voting. Although the armed opponents of the government had intended to disrupt the elections, only a few explosions and armed clashes were reported. In the capital city of Kunduz, for instance, an explosion occurred in Khanabad bus station and a remote bomb was detonated close to Spein Zar polling centre. The Taliban did intimidate some people from casting their votes in rural areas, such as Char Dara, Dasht-e Archi, and some parts of Khanabad districts, where letters had been stuck to mosque walls and shop doors. It described the elections as against Islam, asked local preachers to denounce it, and warned locals to stay away from polling booths.

Very early morning on Election Day, 5 March 2014, in rainy Kunduz City, a group of local journalists started calling each other to prepare for any eventuality of insecurity and threats. They gathered to jointly observe the elections. Sheltered under a tree just behind the governor's office, they waited for him to come out, cast the first ballot, and deliver a speech. The city was tightly surrounded by security forces. The provincial governmental officials jointly appeared in Fatmatul Zahra High School, voted, and called on people to take part in both the presidential and provincial council elections. There were already long queues of voters in front of the polling centres, showing an unexpected turnout of the voters. The author visited several polling centres where people were enthusiastically waiting to cast their votes. Rahna Mohseni, a presidential candidate's agent, observing a female polling station, said she had worked so hard to encourage women to vote for her team. She insisted that this was the only chance to have a trustworthy President. Hamidullah Baluch, the provincial Independent Election Commission's (IEC) head of public information, stated that the commission had distributed 10,000 observation cards in Kunduz to Presidential and Provincial Council observers. He said 12 polling centres, in Chahrdara, Dasht-e Archi, Khanabad, and in Kunduz, remained shut due to high security threats. This was more than initially planned for, as two days before the election the IEC had stated that only three polling centres wouldn't function in the whole province.

Presidential campaign teams and provincial candidates have complained about what they consider the IEC's insufficient attention to technical challenges, such as shortages of ballot papers, low quality ink, and inadequate training of workers. In Kunduz City, for instance, Haisha-e Sediqa, Fatmatul Zahra, Kohandish, and Turkmanha polling centres reported shortages of ballot papers early in the afternoon. Every polling station was given 600 ballots and, according to the IEC, it was not possible for all 600 votes to be cast that soon. The provincial Independent Election Complaint Commission (IECC) told the author that 16-18 complaints in Category A (which may change the outcome of the result) had been registered. According to Sebghat Ullah Wafae, the head of Kunduz IECC, 15 polling centres were quarantined and had asked the IEC for recounts.

Haji Amin Aimaq, the head of Dr. Abdullah Abdullah's office, stated that the IEC's *treacherous act* had deprived many people of their vote. For Ashraf Ghani's team, Election Day went smoothly at the beginning, but later in the afternoon the shortage of ballot papers, insecurity, and the attempts of armed groups to manipulate the vote became major concerns for them. According to Wahidullah Rahmani, Ghani's campaign manager, illegally armed groups planned to disrupt the situation in Zangi Sai area, Khanabad district (this area is controlled by commanders linked to Jamiat and Sayyaf, according to local journalists). But locals' patience prevented this from happening. Further, he

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added, illegal armed groups fired shots into the air. Zalmay Rassul's team considered multiple voting a major concern. Jan Agha, the head of Rassul's youth office, reported that he witnessed instances of multiple voting by individual voters. He also talked about the low quality of the ink. He added that his team received fraud reports from seven polling centres in Khanabad district.

Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, with the backing of local former Jamiat commanders, appeared to have the most votes of all the candidates in the province – at least this was the opinion of the supporters of the other candidates. The influence of the Jamiat network in the province increased the possibility for Dr. Abdullah Abdullah's perceived success. During past decades, many families from Badakhshan, Takhar, and Baghlan provinces – particularly from the Jamiat-dominated areas – took shelter in Kunduz in response to insecurity and joblessness in their provinces. Gradually, this increased the Jamiat supporters' influence in Kunduz. Local Jamiat commanders have also jointly campaigned for Dr. Abdullah Abdullah.

Local political dynamics and the shadow cast by power brokers have also covered the provincial council election. Candidates with less support from local strongmen seem to have had less chance to win a seat. In Kunduz, the ethnic group one belongs to, tribal affiliation, religious sect, and relations with local strongmen all play a major role. The strongest commander in Kunduz, Mir Alam, for instance, supported Dr. Abdullah Abdullah – while Muhammad Omer, called 'Pakhsaparan' (wall crusher) in the Khanabad district, backed Abdul Rab Rasul Sayaf. The Ibrahim family in Imam Sahib district supported both Ashraf Ghani and Sayaf (for more background on the local power structures in Kunduz, see here). According to Qari Najibullah Sediqi, a provincial candidate, disagreements with local religious leaders have negatively impacted his support (read about this candidate's campaign here). According to him, in most of the rural areas where he wished to get votes, the mosque preachers announced voting was *kafir*. Further, his religious leader, Syed Mansour Naderi, asked the Ismaili to cast their votes for someone else, instead of him.

Fauzia Yaftali, a female provincial candidate, reported irregularities in Ali Abad district. According to her, in rural areas the observers were not allowed to oversee the voting; the areas' District Field Coordinators (DFCs) had made deals with presidential and provincial candidates to make sure they got the votes in the polling centres they were responsible for. Hejratullah Hamdard, another provincial council candidate, voiced concern about the interference of local warlords. According to him, local power brokers forced people to vote for specific candidates. Further, he said, these power brokers had collected the locals' voter cards and only returned them after assurances that their votes went to a specific candidate. Therefore, some preferred to stay home fearing violence and intimidation at the polling centres.

Nasrudin Aman, the district governor of Dasht-e Archi, said that six polling centres remained shut due to an exchange of fire between state forces and armed opponents in the district. According to him, 100 Afghan National Police (ANP), 220 Afghan National Army (ANA), and 300 Afghan Local Police (ALP) had been deployed to the district on polling day. Dasht-e Archi is considered one of the most insecure districts in Kunduz. Taliban threats prevented many villagers from voting. According to the district governor, the total population in his district reaches nearly 300,000 people, while only 10,000 to 20,000 people cast their votes. In Chardara district, the Taliban also attempted to disrupt security in remote areas. According to Zalmay Faroqi, Chardarah district governor, three areas, Mama Khel, Choraq, and Nawabad villages, were under serious threat by the Taliban, and three polling centres remained closed or opened late.

Government officials held a joint press conference right after the polling day where they praised the security efforts and expressed dissatisfaction with the IEC's ability to tackle their challenges. Mustafa Muhseni, police chief, reported that no major attacks were registered. One ANA service member was killed, one was wounded, and a few IEC workers reported minor injuries.

Overall, the security and people's participation in Kunduz can be counted as a great achievement, both for the public and the local responsible bodies. On 15 May 2014, the IEC announced the final results of the presidential election. According to the IEC, none of the eight presidential candidates obtained 50+1 percent of the total votes. Therefore, the run-off will take place between two top runners, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah and Dr. Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, on 14

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