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HASEEB HUMAYOON

## AFGHANISTAN REPORT 4

# THE RE-ELECTION OF HAMID KARZAI



INSTITUTE FOR THE  
STUDY of WAR

MILITARY ANALYSIS AND EDUCATION  
FOR CIVILIAN LEADERS

*Front Cover Photograph: President Hamid Karzai walks down the carpet as he is welcomed to the Afghan National Police Training Center Kabul, Afghanistan. Photo by ISAF Media.*

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THE RE-ELECTION OF  
HAMID KARZAI

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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*The assistance of Brett Van Ess and his eye for details has been invaluable to the development of this report. Mr. Van Ess is currently a graduate student at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service. The author is also grateful to ISW interns Aman Farahi, a student at Middlebury College, and Omid Townsend, a graduate student Georgetown University. ISW Research Manager Marisa Cochrane Sullivan and ISW Fellow James Danly assisted in editing the report.*

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- President Karzai has evolved into a savvy and sophisticated politician, and has emerged as a stronger player in Afghan politics through the 2009 election.
- Through extensive but controversial deals and shrewd political maneuvers, Karzai had set himself up for re-election regardless of what happened on election day. Karzai's demobilization of powerful likely challengers was integral in ensuring his re-election.
- Traditional and emerging political players invested in Karzai's re-election, bringing these hitherto distinct political groupings together, and yielding him the electoral strength to overpower his opponents.
  - Karzai formed alliances with a select group of regional and local leaders who enjoy influence in Afghanistan that translated into hundreds of thousands of votes, including Ismail Khan, General Abdul Rashid Dostum, Haji Mohammad Muhaqiq and Gul Agha Sherzai.
  - Karzai also selected his running mates with a calculation aimed at strengthening his position in advance of the vote. Most important was the selection of his former Vice President and Defense Minister Marshal Fahim, which brought a potential Abdullah supporter and powerful financial partner to his side.
  - Some of the competence of Karzai's camp arose from a new and much less discussed nucleus in Afghan politics—a significant and ambitious technocratic political class within the government. This group includes figures such as Minister of Education Ghulam Farooq Wardak, National Directorate of Security Chief Amrullah Saleh, and Minister of Interior Hanif Atmar, but also influential but often publically unknown figures such as his chief of staff, Omar Daudzai.
- President Karzai has accordingly gained increasing capacity to achieve his own ends with domestic rather than international support.
- The United States has lost political capital as a result of the elections process.
  - The United States failed to counter the evolving perception that Washington sought Hamid Karzai's defeat.
  - Ambassador Eikenberry's visits to the offices of rival candidates during the campaign season did not help. Neither did the premature discussion of a run-off by U.S. Special Representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, and the U.S. media.
  - Diplomatic and media pressure for a run-off sought the extension of a process that most Afghans wanted resolved.
- Afghanistan's state institutions are nascent and weak, but politics and political actors are maturing and stronger than ever before.
  - Personalities rather than enduring and credible national institutions dictate the course of politics.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- The international community needs to understand the interests, ambitions, and maneuvering capabilities of the key political players.
  - The reach of politicians to areas beyond Kabul is much greater than recognized. Often their influence beyond the capital exists through personal, commercial, family, and political networks, rather than through official institutions that are easily recognizable to the international community.
  - State institutions do not yet have the ability to deliver wherever and whenever they must.
  - Yet, it is not so much that the Afghan state has been losing ground to insurgents since 2001, as commonly understood. More accurately, the insurgents and political actors are fighting to fill political vacuums. And both camps are making notable progress.
  - Though the international community has recognized the insurgency's expansion they have generally overlooked progress that Karzai and other politicians have made in extending their political networks outward from Kabul.
- Applying expansive concepts such as “corruption,” “fraud,” or “warlords” to explaining current Afghan politics is unhelpful. Although factors such as corruption are in play, a framework of analysis fixated on it deters from understanding the nuances of the evolving political scene in Afghanistan.
- The commercial interests of political actors are shaping strategic dynamics, given the growing marriage of business with politics and the rise of an ambitious, wealthy, and influential political class.
  - Vice President Fahim's new alliance with Karzai is one major example of this dynamic, as the brothers of the political principals have shared business interests.
- Afghanistan's personality-based political order lacks the stability and endurance that can encourage public confidence. Such a political scene lends itself to an often overstated appearance of fragility.
- Institutions must develop in order to organize the politics beyond the personalities, and afford it an enduring structure.
- Simply reinforcing ministries and projects is not sufficient to creating enduring, functioning and accountable institutions.
  - Development of national political parties is a necessary step for transcending personality politics.
  - Afghanistan must develop a state bureaucracy that is sufficiently divorced from political power-players to have its own separate interests, motivations, and professional cadre.
  - The international community must help develop capable institutions that do more than reinforce individuals' political and commercial networks, and also increase the delivery potential and accountability of government.





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# THE RE-ELECTION OF HAMID KARZAI

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By Haseeb Humayoon

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A new political reality is evolving in Afghanistan, energized by the 2009 electoral process. Afghan President Hamid Karzai is the center of gravity. Though Karzai began 2009 embattled, he entered 2010 with a new five-year mandate. Karzai and his allies are emboldened, and personality-based power-politics in the country has seen major growth. Stabilizing Afghanistan requires transforming personality politics into enduring and accountable institutions. To assist with that, the international community must recognize the new nature of Afghanistan's politics, and recalibrate how it uses its political capital.

This report documents Afghanistan's politics as they evolved in 2009, and examines the implications they will have for the way forward. A particular focus is devoted to the August elections. The first section explains the controversial beginning to the electoral process, the rise of leading candidates, and Karzai's demobilization of potential challengers. The second section evaluates the critical—and at times contentious—alliances formed by key candidates, and the emergence of a vibrant political scene during the campaign process. In the third part, this report illustrates the significance of the election day, the ensuing political fallout, and the domestic and international responses. This section also considers Washington's role in the process, and the expenditure of international political capital. This report concludes with an assessment of where Afghan politics stand in early 2010, and what can be done to create more enduring political institutions.

## A CONTENTIOUS START

The August 20, 2009 election was Afghanistan's second ever direct presidential vote. The largely untested Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, which was ratified in 2004, guided the 2009 elections.<sup>1</sup> This Constitution sets a specific date for presidential elections. Article Sixty-One states that an elected president's term

“shall expire on the first of Jauza (May 22) of the fifth year after elections. Elections for the new President shall be held within 30 to 60 days prior to the end of the presidential term.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite the stringent constitutionally specified date, a delay was inevitable. Holding an election before May 22, 2009 required preparations during the harsh winter of Afghanistan, a largely insurmountable challenge. In fact, none of the past three elections in Afghanistan have been held anytime before summer. The Independent Election Commission (IEC)—the body tasked with administering national elections—announced during the first week of January 2009 that the presidential and provincial council elections would be held on August 20, 2009.

The IEC-specified date created a three month gap between when President Hamid Karzai's constitutionally-designated term in office would expire (May 22, 2009) and when the elections would be held (August 20, 2009). Questions about what should happen in that interim period dominated the discourse after IEC's announcement. This was despite the fact it was widely recognized that massive security and administrative challenges rendered the IEC unable to hold an election on the constitutionally-specified date. Plus, some had prompted the idea of a possible merger of the presidential and parliamentary elections (scheduled for 2010) to save money and effort.<sup>3</sup> But

the parliament's reluctance to cut short its term, and the legal requirements of holding presidential elections in 2009, led to discarding the merger idea.<sup>4</sup>

The central question in the early months of 2009 was what should happen to Karzai after May 22, 2009. The political elite in Afghanistan were divided on this.<sup>5</sup> The matter was complicated further as Hamid Karzai had declared his intentions to seek reelection.<sup>6</sup>

Afghanistan's Constitution had no provision to address the issue of a gap between the end of an elected president's term in office and the earliest possible elections. Albeit ambiguous and stretched, one interpretation discussed in public and parliamentary debates would have led to an interim government led by the Chairman of the Senate.<sup>7</sup> The problem with this option was that it was politically infeasible, given that the Chairman of the Senate, Sebaghatullah Mujadidi, was unable to administer an interim government, not least because of his old age. Furthermore, President Karzai was unlikely to accept stepping down before the polls, and the international community was more comfortable with stability than a change before elections.<sup>8</sup>

With no clear constitutional resolution, President Karzai's political opponents argued that the president's term in office after May 22, 2009 was unconstitutional and insisted on his resignation on that day.<sup>9</sup> They asked for an interim administration to run the electoral process.<sup>10</sup> Karzai and his supporters, however, argued the president could remain in office until the next elected leader was inaugurated.<sup>11</sup> Their argument was based on a clause in Article Sixty-One that suggested a sitting president's term ends "after elections."<sup>12</sup>

In response to persistent opposition calls to step down and allow for an interim administration, on February 27, 2009, Karzai decreed that the elections should be held on April 21, 2009 in accordance with the constitution.<sup>13</sup> The IEC, however, affirmed its previous decision and rejected the president's call, saying that "the Independent Election Commission, considering the climate, budgetary, security and operational challenges

announced the date of presidential and provincial council elections for the 20<sup>th</sup> of August 2009."<sup>14</sup>

The decree to call early elections was one in a series of maneuvers by Karzai that outsmarted his opponents. The announcement caught many opposition figures unwilling to endorse the new date as none had yet made any serious arrangements to run against Karzai. And since the constitution does not have an interim government provision or any specific deliberation relevant to the scenario, they were confronted with either early elections without any preparations, or accepting that Karzai remain during the interim period and thus buying time to campaign.

Questions about the fairness of a poll under a government led by Karzai were also raised early in the process. Anwar Ul Haq Ahadi, who had resigned from his post as Minister of Finance in February 2009 to run against Karzai, declared that "there is pretty much a consensus now among contenders that if President Karzai was to stay in power, we would not have transparent elections."<sup>15</sup>

Afghanistan's parliament also remained divided on the issue of what could happen after May 22, 2009. Some members of parliament supported continuity of Karzai's term until new elections and others favored an interim set-up. Seeing that a parliamentary resolution of the issue was unlikely, Karzai sent the dispute to the Supreme Court. The Court ruled on March 29, 2009 that it was in the interest of the country for the president to remain in office until a new leader was chosen.<sup>16</sup> This ruling effectively extended Karzai's term by three months, and would later serve as the basis for his continued stay in office when the outcome of the August 20, 2009 election was disputed.

The United States endorsed the Court's ruling. State Department spokesman Gordon Duguid announced that "the United States strongly supports and welcomes this ruling," and in Washington's view, "the continuity of government in the critical period before elections is vital and contributes to creating stability."<sup>17</sup> The Supreme Court ruling calmed, but failed to put an end to, the debate

over the constitutionality of Karzai's stay in office after the May deadline. During the campaign season and after the polls, on an intermittent basis, representatives of opposition candidates questioned the legitimacy of Karzai's stay in office.<sup>18</sup>

## KARZAI WEAKENS HIS CHALLENGERS

The challenge to Karzai's reelection came from individual candidates. Eight years after the ousting of the Taliban regime, no single viable political party—in power or in opposition—has emerged in Afghanistan. The president has avoided creating a party of his own,\* and the 2004 parliamentary elections law largely discouraged the formation of political parties.<sup>19</sup> The Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) electoral system does not require parliamentary election candidates to be part of any party.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the electoral law does not require candidates for the presidency to be representatives of any political blocks or parties either. In fact, it recognizes only individual candidates. This has led to the inexistence of any legal stimulus for lasting political organization in parliamentary or presidential politics.

Many individuals that were formerly part of President Karzai's cabinet or associated with the post-2001 effort to rebuild a state in Afghanistan were seen as likely contenders for the presidency. Their odds of success were better if united on one opposition ticket. Yet, there was little in common amongst the political strongmen considered to pose a challenge to Karzai, aside from their criticism of Karzai for the failures to provide security and good governance.<sup>21</sup> This alone, however, could not have yielded a unified political program or an agreement on leadership and structure of the opposition.

Likely candidates considered to pose a serious challenge to Karzai's reelection included: Ali Ahmad Jalali, the former interior minister of Afghanistan from 2003 to 2005; Zalmay Khal-

\*Karzai is influenced by the perception of the stigmatized role of political parties in Afghanistan. This perception is owed to a particular interpretation of Afghan history that points to political activism and party formation as the cause of the April 1978 Communist revolution and Afghanistan's ensuing disasters.

ilzad, the Afghan-born former U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, Afghanistan, and the United Nations;<sup>22</sup> and Gul Agha Sherzai, the governor of the major eastern province, Nangarhar.<sup>23</sup> Each of these men had, over the years, hinted their interest in seeking the Afghan presidency. Finance Minister Anwar-Ul-Haq Ahadi resigned from the cabinet in February 2009 to challenge Karzai for the office.<sup>24</sup> Former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah and Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai also announced their intentions to run, but were considered to have lesser national appeal than the first four.<sup>25</sup>

Attempts were made by many of these figures either to unite as one ticket or to throw one's support behind another's candidacy.<sup>26</sup> Such efforts were unsuccessful, largely on account of longstanding personal rivalries, ambitions for the presidency, and what some observers have called "outside pressure."<sup>27</sup> Since the August elections, allegations have surfaced indicating that U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke actively encouraged several people to run against Karzai.<sup>28</sup> The alleged direct encouragement of potential candidates is likely to have discouraged them from building internal alliances. Those encouraged likely interpreted the gesture as U.S. endorsement of their candidacy, and thus indicative of some grander plan against Karzai.<sup>29</sup> Another equally if not more important reason for the lack of a strong opposition ticket was Karzai's shrewd attempts to successfully divide and shrink the pool of his major opponents.

According to the IEC's timeline for the electoral process, the candidate registration period ran from April 25 to May 8, 2009.<sup>30</sup> Ali Ahmad Jalali and Zalmay Khalilzad did not register their candidacy, partly in opposition to the failure of potential candidates to unite before that deadline.<sup>31</sup> Jalali was quoted as saying "everyone has an ego and no one wanted to allow anyone else to take the center stage."<sup>32</sup> Jalali's abrupt exit from the race, despite his multi-year efforts to cultivate support to challenge Karzai, caused disappointment amongst his supporters. It has also been reported that at least Khalilzad had reached a deal with Karzai on a post-election role in Afghanistan.<sup>33</sup>

Gul Agha Sherzai, the governor of Nangarhar and formerly governor of Kandahar, came closest to challenging Karzai. He recruited Karzai's then Vice President Ahmad Zia Massoud as his running mate and was on the verge of declaring his candidacy.<sup>34</sup> However, one week before the candidate registration deadline, Sherzai was invited to the Presidential Palace for a meeting with President Karzai. The discussion between Karzai and Sherzai is not publically known, but Sherzai announced after the meeting that he would no longer challenge the incumbent.<sup>35</sup> Many have speculated about the reasons for Sherzai's exit, and some have posited that Karzai convincingly argued that Sherzai's presence in the race would divide the Pashtun vote and thus serve neither of them.<sup>36</sup> It is highly likely that Sherzai may have also extracted greater incentives in return for his support of Karzai's candidacy, such as more control over provincial and regional affairs.<sup>37</sup> Whatever the reason, Sherzai's decision to back Karzai was significant and it cemented Karzai's position as the strongest in the race.

Former Finance Minister Ahadi was also seen as a likely challenger. He led one of the only fairly organized political parties in the country—the Pashtun centric Afghan Mellat party. But he was also sharply undercut by Karzai and his allies, leading him to drop out of the race. Ahadi's image was tarnished soon after announcing his decision to run. Afghan Mellat's deputy and a Karzai ally, Ghulam Jailani Popal—who runs the powerful Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG)—announced that Mr. Ahadi's candidacy was not endorsed by the party.<sup>38</sup> It was a blow from which Ahadi failed to recover.<sup>39</sup>

Occasionally, there was also speculation about challenges to Karzai from within his own cabinet—most notably led by either the education minister Farooq Wardak or the interior minister Hanif Atmar.<sup>40</sup> The political ambitions of both these individuals have long served as the basis for speculation on future of political leadership in Afghanistan. In 2009, however, as the candidate registration deadline arrived, they both reaffirmed their support for Karzai's reelection.<sup>41</sup>

The Karzai campaign used a wide array of tactics to avert the emergence of any formidable opposition. Their appeal included promises of future roles in the government, as well as cautions against splitting the Pashtun vote.<sup>42</sup> They also portrayed their candidate as the uncontested front-runner. When it was clear that Jalali, Khalilzad, and Sherzai would not challenge Karzai, the news reports indicated that they had either stepped down in favor of Karzai, or reached a deal with the incumbent.<sup>43</sup> Karzai's campaign was active and savvy in publicizing support from these figures by generating headlines such as "Ali Ahmad Jalali lends his weight to President Karzai."<sup>44</sup> Making it known that these potential challengers had either reached a deal or dropped out in favor of Karzai painted an image of Karzai as unchallengeable.

Yet despite co-opting or demobilizing some of his potential opponents, forty-three people registered to challenge Karzai.<sup>45</sup> The Afghan Constitution specified very basic qualifications for who could run for the presidency, and who could not. Any individual that is not a convicted criminal, is at least forty years old at the time of candidacy registration, is a Muslim Afghan citizen born of Afghan parents, and holds no other citizenship is eligible to run.<sup>46</sup> By these broad standards, hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of Afghans qualify to run for the office of the president. This could be true about electoral systems in many other countries too. But in other systems the presence of political parties and inter-party contests of leadership serve as filters against crowded candidate lists. In Afghanistan, the inexistence of nationally viable parties and such open criteria for candidacy produced a long list of candidates.

Amongst the forty three challengers, Abdullah Abdullah, Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, parliamentarian Ramazan Bashardost, deputy speaker of the parliament Mirwais Yasini and former attorney general Abdul Jabar Sabit were the few names with some degree of public stature. More than half of the candidates on the list were unknown to most Afghans. By demobilizing the main figures perceived to pose a serious challenge, Karzai had effectively set himself up for an easy contest. Yet the crowded ballot, and some of the

names on it, posed a different kind of threat to Karzai's reelection.

Constitutionally, a winning candidate has to earn fifty percent plus one vote in the first round of the elections to be declared victorious. If no candidate secures fifty percent plus one vote, a second round of elections is required to determine the winner. While none of the candidates on the ballot were considered likely to defeat Karzai on August 20<sup>th</sup>, a run-off was still possible.<sup>47</sup> Abdullah Abdullah was considered to be Karzai's closet rival. And while Abdullah was not seen as likely to defeat Karzai, it was implied by many that he could win a significant portion of the votes, and that, coupled with the marginal votes of the other forty plus candidates could force Karzai into a run-off. Essentially, the August 20<sup>th</sup> election was a race for Karzai to win in the first round, while his opponents sought to bring his margin below fifty percent plus one vote to force a run-off.<sup>48</sup>

## CRUCIAL ELECTORAL ALLIANCES

Forming broad alliances was another tactic Karzai employed to ensure his success on election day. Despite the inexistence of many formal structures and parties, a select group of regional and local leaders in Afghanistan continue to enjoy popularity and influence that can translate into hundreds of thousands of votes. Winning the support of these key individuals was an important focus for the candidates. Karzai managed to sway most, if not all of the figures whose support for a candidate could potentially tilt the balance of an election in the province or region under their influence.

### *Ismail Khan and Herat Province*

In 2004, Herat province had the second largest turnout of voters in the country, with over half a million votes.<sup>49</sup> As a former governor, Ismail Khan wields great influence over his home province of Herat with notable sway in the neighboring provinces of Ghor and Badghis. In the run up to the 2009 vote, Herat was likely to have a strong

turnout of voters because of relative security. It was also likely to be a province where Karzai's nearest rival Abdullah Abdullah might win some support with most of the ethnic Tajik population living in the province.<sup>50</sup>

While President Karzai courted the support of Ismail Khan, Khan's support for Karzai was not made public until a few weeks before the election.<sup>51</sup> It remains unclear what inducements convinced Ismail Khan to back Karzai's candidacy. Arguably, it was the incumbent's electability, as well as promises of greater control for Ismail Khan in Herat, a matter the former governor has sought with fervor.<sup>53</sup> Ever since he was reluctantly transferred to Kabul under U.S. pressure, Ismail Khan has been uncomfortable about the trajectory of Herat's security and attempts by his rivals to decrease his support in the province.<sup>54</sup>

On August 20, 2009, Karzai came in first place in Herat by more than a ten percent margin of votes.<sup>55</sup> While many of Herat's other influential figures, such as the powerful member of the Religious Council Maulawi Khudaidad Saleh declared their support for Karzai, Ismail Khan's alliance with the incumbent was surely decisive. As a cabinet minister for Water and Power, legal restrictions barred Ismail Khan from campaigning for any of the candidates. Yet that legal provision was disregarded, and Ismail Khan and other officials did campaign for Karzai.<sup>52</sup> On August 14, 2009 Ismail Khan had organized a rally in Herat for Karzai, and the wide attendance marked a clear show of force in his home province.<sup>56</sup> Going into the August 20<sup>th</sup> election, the overt declaration of support by Ismail Khan also gave the Karzai campaign the weight of this nationally recognized figure.

### *Atta Mohammad Noor and Balkh Province*

Balkh is a major trade corridor and a highly populated province where relative security was expected to result in major voter turnout. In the 2004 elections, Balkh province was hotly contested. Then, President Karzai won the province with 29.8 percent of the vote.<sup>57</sup> His closest rival,

Mohammad Younis Qanuni, received twenty-five percent of the vote, followed by General Abdul Rashid Dostum with 23.4 percent and Haji Mohammad Muhaqiq with 14.4 percent.<sup>58</sup> Turnout was high, with almost four hundred thousand voters.<sup>59</sup> In 2009, Balkh was considered to be crucial. It became even more so after the provincial governor Atta Mohammad Noor declared his support for Karzai's closest rival Abdullah Abdullah on June 18, 2009.<sup>60</sup>

Noor was a commander in Ahmad Shah Masoud's resistance force against the Taliban. Upon the ousting of the Taliban regime in 2001, he was in charge of the 7<sup>th</sup> Corps Command of the Army in Mazar City.<sup>61</sup> He was appointed as the governor of Balkh in 2004.<sup>62</sup> During the early years of Karzai's government, including the 2004 elections, Noor supported Karzai.<sup>63</sup> While Balkh was once the powerbase of ethnic Uzbek militia leader General Abdul Rashid Dostum's allies and ethnic Hazara leader Haji Mohammad Muhaqiq, Noor has marginalized both men and has consolidated his base in the province since 2001.<sup>64</sup> He has never run for popular office, but it is recognized that in northern Afghanistan politics he maintains a great deal of influence and popular support.<sup>65</sup>

Noor's support for Abdullah was the largest boost Karzai's chief rival received. It also further complicated matters for Karzai, as he had appointed Noor to his post as governor. Some of Karzai's supporters argued the governor was violating the law by declaring his support for a candidate while holding a high government office.<sup>66</sup> There was speculation about his potential ouster by Karzai, and the Ministry of Interior attempted to make changes to the police structure in the province.<sup>67</sup> Noor publically warned against any such moves and blocked the changes.<sup>68</sup> Noor's supporters argued that his declaration in support of Abdullah was no different than Nangarhar governor Gul Agha Sherzai's declaration of support for Karzai. Any attempt to unseat Noor would have likely faced a backlash, as it could have been interpreted along ethnic lines. Noor is an ethnic Tajik, while Sherzai and Karzai are both Pashtuns. Politically, it would also have been difficult to unseat Noor as he had built and consolidated a base of support in

the province amongst the civil service, police, and business community.<sup>69</sup>

A combination of factors led to Noor's support for Abdullah. The governor may have desired to display his political weight by going against the tide of other regionally powerful figures that had chosen to support Karzai's candidacy. There was also speculation that Noor wanted to be named Karzai's vice president, and thus was disappointed when that didn't happen.<sup>70</sup> But no factor, arguably, was more crucial in Noor's decision to side with Abdullah than Karzai's alliance with Noor's local rivals in Balkh province: Juma Khan Hamdard, the former Hizb-e-Islami commander from Balkh and current governor of Paktia province; General Abdul Rashid Dostum; and Haji Mohammad Muhaqiq.<sup>71</sup>

Results from the August election show that Abdullah Abdullah won the province with 44.2 percent of the vote. Karzai came second with 30.6 percent. Voter turnout in the province was the fourth highest in the country, with almost three hundred thousand voters. Karzai had won the province in 2004, despite opposition from Dostum and Muhaqiq, and perhaps in part because of the support of Governor Noor. In 2009, Abdullah's victory in the province despite the contest involving Karzai, Muhaqiq, and Dostum on one side can be attributed to Noor's efforts.

#### *General Abdul Rashid Dostum and Northwestern Afghanistan*

Afghanistan's Turkic population, primarily Uzbeks and Turkmens, who reside mainly in the north and northwestern parts of the country are a significant electoral constituency. In the 2004 elections, the ethnic Uzbek militia leader General Abdul Rashid Dostum ran against President Karzai and won ten percent of votes (over 800,000 votes in total).<sup>72</sup> Most of those votes came from provinces with large Turkic populations: Jozjan, Faryab, Sarepul, Takhar, and Balkh.<sup>73</sup> Currently, General Dostum is the Chief of Staff to the Commander in Chief of Afghanistan's Armed Forces, President Karzai. He is also the leader of the political faction Junbish-e-Mili Islami Afghanistan.

Based on the 2004 results, and broader historical trends, the Uzbek general was perceived to have a major political base amongst the ethnic Turkic population.

For over a year before the 2009 election, Dostum lived in exile in Turkey after a drunken public assault on his former aide and ethnic Turkmen leader Akbar Bai.<sup>74</sup> General Dostum bargained for an end to exile as well as a share in the future government in return for his votes. His party, Junbish-e-Mili, promised votes from the northern provinces, perceived to be a region with high risk of voters turning to Karzai's rival Abdullah.<sup>75</sup> Abdullah's main backer, Atta Mohammad Noor had over the years extended his powerbase in the north at the expense of Junbish and Hizb-e-Wahdat, an ethnic Hazara party (detailed in the following section.) It was likely that Junbish leaders such as Said Noorullah Saadat and Shakir Kargar regarded the race as an opportunity to reenergize the party's base, and arguably counter their rival Noor's aggressive consolidation.

Crucial to Karzai's formula for winning the 2009 election in the first round was co-opting General Dostum and Haji Mohammad Muhaqiq, the leader of the ethnic Hazara Hizb-e-Wahdat. In 2004, Dostum's and Muhaqiq's votes amounted to more than twenty percent of the total.<sup>76</sup> Karzai won the 2004 election with fifty-five percent of the vote, despite challenges from both Muhaqiq and Dostum. General Dostum's and Haji Muhaqiq's support in 2009 was seen as the key factor countering any loss of popularity that Karzai might have suffered in his traditional base. The twenty percent of the votes the Dostum-Muhaqiq alliance promised must have been regarded as guarantor of victory in the first round.

There were challenges to the Karzai-Dostum alliance, largely due to the president's inability to convince U.S. officials that Dostum had to return from exile.<sup>77</sup> The U.S. objected to Dostum's return on many grounds, including reports that his militia was involved in the massacre of thousands of Taliban prisoners in 2001.<sup>78</sup> Eventually, Karzai got his way and Dostum returned before the election for a short period of time.<sup>79</sup> While rumors

were ripe in Kabul that Dostum was considering switching his support to Abdullah, Dostum actively rallied his base for Karzai.<sup>80</sup> On August 20, 2009, Junbish delivered what Karzai had banked on. Karzai won the majority of votes in Faryab, Jauzjan, and Saripul provinces, where Dostum had defeated Karzai in 2004.<sup>81</sup> Dostum and his party also played a significant role in garnering votes for Karzai in the crucial and contested Balkh province.

Some of Karzai's alliances, as that with Ismail Khan or General Dostum yielded electoral dividends. There were other deals made that did not deliver on August 20<sup>th</sup>, or caused unease as the election approached. Most notably amongst them was Karzai's alliance with the Haji Mohammad Muhaqiq led ethnic Hazara faction and the Arsalai family in Nangarhar.

#### *Haji Mohammad Muhaqiq and Afghanistan's Central Highlands*

A member of the parliament and former ethnic Hazara militia leader, Muhaqiq was a candidate in the 2004 elections and won almost a million votes, or 11.7 percent of the total.<sup>82</sup> Muhaqiq was perceived to have support amongst Hazaras in Afghanistan's central highlands: Bamiyan and Daikundi provinces, as well as the Hazara-populated districts in Wardak and Ghazni provinces. He was also seen as crucial to garnering votes in his home province of Balkh, and from Kabul's almost one million strong Hazara population.<sup>83</sup>

Before the 2009 elections, Muhaqiq's Hizb-e-Wahdat formed an alliance with General Dostum's Junbish-e-Mili party to strengthen their bargaining position with the presidential candidates. The Junbish-Wahdat alliance claimed to control over twenty percent of votes nationwide.<sup>84</sup>

Karzai managed to court Muhaqiq's support. The Wahdat leader publically claimed that Karzai had promised his faction the control of several ministries, provinces, and embassies upon his reelection.<sup>85</sup> Muhaqiq also claimed that Karzai had agreed to change the status of two ethnic Hazara districts in Pashtun dominated Ghazni and

Wardak provinces into new provinces.<sup>86</sup>

While the Karzai campaign banked heavily on Muhaqiq's potential to draw at least ten percent of all votes, Muhaqiq largely disappointed them on August 20<sup>th</sup>. Candidate Ramazan Bashardost, a parliamentarian of Hazara ethnic origin, garnered many votes from would-be Muhaqiq supporters.<sup>87</sup> Bashardost ran a populist campaign, and was the only candidate who visited almost every province in the country. On the day of the vote, despite the support Karzai received from Muhaqiq and other prominent ethnic Hazara leaders including Vice President Khalili, Bashardost defeated Karzai in every major Hazara populated area of the country, with the exception of Bamiyan province, where he lost to Karzai by less than one percent.<sup>88</sup> Daidkundi province and the ethnic Hazara districts of Ghazni and Wardak were all won by Bashardost with double-digit leads over Karzai.<sup>89</sup>

Bashardost victory in most of the ethnic Hazara areas indicates two possible trends: either Afghanistan's Hazaras are no longer swayed by factional leaders from the civil war such as Muhaqiq and Khalili, or—and more likely—they will vote for whoever on the ballot is a Hazara. In 2004, Muhaqiq was the Hazara on the ballot, and they voted for him. In 2009, Bashardost was their natural choice if ethnicity was the determining factor.

Muhaqiq's supporters may claim to have brought Karzai most of his votes in Balkh province. Yet numbers suggest that Muhaqiq's role in Karzai's thirty percent in Balkh must have been marginal. In 2004, Muhaqiq won fourteen percent of the vote in Balkh. In 2009, Bashardost received eleven percent of the vote there. It could be argued that most of Muhaqiq's voters voted for Bashardost. In Balkh, the increase in votes for Karzai when compared to his tally in 2004 can be mostly attributed to the support of General Dostum rather than Muhaqiq.

#### *The Arsalai Family and Nangarhar Province*

Going into the 2009 elections, Nangarhar was predicted to be contested by several of the Pashtun candidates. It was a significant province for

multiple reasons. Most importantly, it was one of the only relatively secure ethnically Pashtun provinces where voter turnout was likely to be high.<sup>90</sup> Several Karzai challengers were predicted to make inroads into Nangarhar, including Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai and Mirwais Yasini—a parliamentarian who hails from the province. Initially, another likely challenge to Karzai's prospects in the province came from Haji Baryalai Arsalai, the brother of slain anti-Soviet Jihad leaders Abdul Haq and Haji Qadeer (from the Arsalai family). The family of Abdul Haq and Haji Qadeer was perceived to carry popular support in the province, a belief that at least partially resulted in Karzai's appointing one of their brothers—Haji Din Mohammad—as his national campaign chairman.<sup>91</sup>

The appointment of a Nangarhari, Haji Din Mohammad, as Karzai's national campaign chairman is a testament to the importance the incumbent attached to the province. Karzai, a Pashtun from the south of Afghanistan, may have also calculated that an eastern Pashtun would broaden his base. But courting this support came at a price. Prior to the start of the campaign season (June 16–August 16, 2009), Karzai released a convicted drug trafficker who was the nephew of Haji Din Mohammad.<sup>92</sup> The release of the convicted trafficker seriously stained Karzai's image in local and international media. Din Mohammad claimed he never lobbied Karzai for the release of his nephew, but the timing of the release and the appointment of Din Mohammad as the campaign chief begged serious questions.<sup>93</sup>

Though Din Mohammad's family was perceived to be powerful and popular in the province, both perceptions turned out to be questionable as the campaign evolved. Another nephew of Din Mohammad, Haji Qadeer's son Haji Zahir, had returned to Nangarhar from a police chief post in northern Afghanistan to campaign for Karzai. In a move signaling the Karzai campaign's distrust of Haji Din Mohammad's and Haji Zahir's vote garnering abilities in the province, some of the president's aides facilitated the return of a rival of the Arsalai family—former militia commander Haji Zaman Ghamsharik—back to Nangarhar from exile in Peshawar.



Haji Zaman was accused by the Arsalai family for involvement in the murder of their brother and former Vice President Haji Qadeer in 2002.<sup>94</sup> Zaman hails from the large Khugiani district in Nangarhar, and his return was meant to rally his supporters behind Karzai.<sup>95</sup> While this met with resistance from the Arsalais, eventually Karzai managed to convince both parties that they were equally needed. Karzai's supporters later presented this as the success of their leader's negotiating skills.

In Nangarhar, apart from the campaign structure that relied on people like Haji Zahir and later Haji Zaman, Karzai's effort included mobilizing the provincial council, as well as several direct appeals to communities all around the province. Other candidates also alleged that in Nangarhar the provincial government authorities—including the governor Gul Agha Sherzai—heavily deployed state resources in support of Karzai.<sup>96</sup> Abdullah's support in the province came from marginal figures such as the ethnic Pashai parliamentarian and former anti-Taliban guerilla commander Haji Hazrat Ali.

On August 20, 2009, Karzai won in Nangarhar by over seventy-five percent of the vote, and his largest share of votes came from this province.<sup>97</sup> It is hard to project a scenario under which Karzai would have lost Nangarhar. But had it not been for Gul Agha Sherzai's reach in the province as a sitting governor, and the Karzai campaign's last minute efforts to supplement Haji Din Mohammad's and Haji Zahir's efforts with other alliances, Karzai may have faced a more serious challenge.

Apart from the above five power centers, there are several other figures in the country whose support was electorally crucial. In general, Karzai managed to court most of them, either directly or by proxies such as his vice presidential nominee Fahim. Some of Karzai's alliances, as that of Haji Mohammad Muhaqiq and Haji Din Mohammad, turned out to have had questionable electoral merits. Overall, however, Karzai's policy of enhancing his electoral bloc with big names denied his opponents the resources and political power of those influential figures.

## POWERFUL RUNNING MATES

Article Sixty of Afghanistan's Constitution requires a candidate to name two running mates. Hamid Karzai opted for his former Vice President and Defense Minister Marshall Fahim (2001-2004), to replace his first vice president Zia Massoud. But Karzai kept Vice President Karim Khalili, an ethnic Hazara factional leader, as his other running mate. Karzai's choice of Fahim was controversial, on account of his unpopularity with the international community and large portions of Afghan society.<sup>98</sup> Karzai, however, was savvy in selecting Fahim since it brought a potential supporter of his opponent Abdullah Abdullah and an influential politician to his side. One strong explanation for Karzai's return to an alliance with Fahim was commercial. Fahim's brother Haji Yasin and Karzai's brother Mahmoud are reported to have close commercial ties, and that the Fahim family's commercial allies were major contributors to Karzai's campaign finance.<sup>99</sup>

The selection of Fahim as a running mate also signaled Karzai's independence from international pressures, while earning the ticket wider attention, though often negative. About his choice of Fahim, Karzai said it "was a decision that I made for the good of the country, for the unity of the country, for the strength of Afghanistan, in which it has a government that is Afghan and not influenced from outside."<sup>100</sup>

Karzai's second running mate, Khalili, was retained despite his failure to win even his home district of Behsood in Wardak province in both 2004 and, ultimately, in the first round of 2009 elections.<sup>101</sup> The fundraising potential of Karim Khalili, however, was massive as his brother Haji Nabi has emerged as a major real-estate businessman in the country.<sup>102</sup> Haji Nabi also has his own television station, which is of serious political utility.<sup>103</sup>

Abdullah's and Ashraf Ghani's running mate selections went largely unnoticed. In an effort to project an image contrary to that of Karzai—who had opted for two running mates with militia leadership backgrounds—Abdullah selected Humayun Shah Asifi, an ethnic Pashtun, former

diplomat, and member of the last royal family in Afghanistan. Yet, Asifi failed to possess any major political base in the country. In 2004, he was a candidate for the presidency and earned only 0.3 percent of the votes.<sup>104</sup> Abdullah also chose Dr. Cheragh Ali Cheragh, an ethnic Hazara physician and owner of a medical institute in Kabul. Cheragh was a political newcomer, and did not present a real challenge to Bashardost, Khalili, Muhaqiq, or many of Karzai's other allies amongst Afghanistan's Hazaras. Thus, Abdullah's running mates brought little political weight to his ticket.

Abdullah's candidacy, however, received a partial boost when the National Front (NF) declared that he was their candidate.<sup>105</sup> The NF is one of the only organized political blocs in the parliament, composed of a combination of former anti-Soviet resistance and communist-era leaders.<sup>106</sup> Abdullah announced that he welcomed the NF's support but that he was entering the race as an independent candidate.<sup>107</sup> Despite this claim, Abdullah's campaign infrastructure and media presence was largely dominated by figures such as NF leader and spokesperson Fazil Sangcharaki.

The NF endorsement of Abdullah was not of major consequence, least because the alliance was already fractured after Karzai selected Marshall Fahim as his running mate. Marshall Fahim was by many accounts the most powerful leader in the NF.<sup>108</sup> Karzai's selection of Fahim was long-rumored, and the announcement came earlier than the NF's declaration of support for Abdullah. Even during deliberations on choosing a candidate for the NF, Marshall Fahim had rejected the idea of supporting Abdullah and attempted to convince the front to ally with Karzai.<sup>109</sup> Attracting Fahim away from the NF weakened a group that was less likely to support Karzai with Abdullah's presence in the race. The NF's other influential figure, former president Burhandud-Din Rabbani, was also likely to be unhappy with—amongst other things—the sidelining of his son-in-law and former vice president Ahmad Zia Massoud from Karzai's electoral ticket.

## U.S. DISENCHANTMENT WITH KARZAI

In the run up to the 2004 presidential elections, Karzai was clearly the “U.S. backed candidate.”<sup>110</sup> In the 2009 election, this was not to be the case. The Obama Administration's dissatisfaction with the performance of the incumbent Karzai was more than evident.

During the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, then-candidate Obama famously remarked that “the Karzai government has not gotten out of the bunker.”<sup>111</sup> While Karzai enjoyed close relations with President Bush, including weekly video conference calls, in a January 2009 trip to Afghanistan, U.S. Vice President-Elect Joe Biden delivered a clear message to the Afghan president that “it is going to be different.”<sup>112</sup> Once in office, prompt and pointed action followed Obama's critical rhetoric. He cut the weekly video conferences with Karzai, and the first time President Obama called Karzai was four weeks after his inauguration.<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, President Obama's Special Representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, had previously made public comments openly critical of President Karzai, including an accusation of an “open disregard for justice.”<sup>114</sup>

Washington's overt disenchantment with President Karzai led many potential candidates to believe the U.S. might be open to endorsing or facilitating the formation of an opposition ticket. One likely candidate, Gul Agha Sherzai, spread rumors of how President Obama extended him a personal invitation to attend his inauguration.<sup>115</sup> Sherzai also reminded many that he was the first Afghan leader to meet Obama when the then-senator travelled to Afghanistan in July 2008. One of Sherzai's advisors even remarked “the Obama visit is what started” all of Sherzai's presidential ambitions.<sup>116</sup>

In a move highlighting the importance of the election to the U.S., late in March 2009, Ambassador Holbrooke sent the former Ambassador to Sudan, Timothy Carney, to head a team at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul tasked with overseeing the electoral process.<sup>117</sup>

The United States publically declared a policy whereby it would not favor a candidate in the election and it would work with whomever was elected.<sup>118</sup> Despite U.S. assurances, it was hard for the ordinary Afghans, and even major political leaders, to believe that the United States did not have a candidate in the contest. President Karzai's camp was convinced Washington had its candidate, and that it wasn't Karzai.<sup>119</sup> More recent reports suggest U.S. officials encouraged some of Karzai's challengers, despite the stated U.S. policy of not supporting or opposing any candidate.<sup>120</sup>

During the campaign season, U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Karl Eikenberry, made visits to the offices of the three perceived serious challengers to Karzai: Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, Abdullah Abdullah, and Mirwais Yasini.<sup>121</sup> In those visits, Ambassador Eikenberry held press conferences alongside the candidates.<sup>122</sup> The U.S. Embassy argued that these gestures were designed to indicate that the U.S. had no favorites in the race. The same candidates were also invited to U.S. Embassy meetings with visiting Congressional delegations and senior officials such as Ambassador Richard Holbrooke and National Security Advisor General James Jones.<sup>123</sup> Despite denials by Washington and the Embassy in Kabul that the U.S. had any favorites in the race, many candidates energetically exploited their American connections. Mirwais Yasini and Abdullah Abdullah printed photos of their meetings with Ambassador Richard Holbrooke or Ambassador Karl Eikenberry on their campaign papers or websites.<sup>124</sup> Ashraf Ghani even appointed Democratic strategist James Carville as his adviser, arguably to illustrate his ties with Washington.<sup>125</sup>

Selective engagement with the aforementioned opposition candidates fostered Karzai's fears that the United States preferred to see his defeat.<sup>126</sup> The engagements between U.S. officials and candidates such as Ashraf Ghani and Mirwais Yasini also coincided with Karzai's efforts to flip them to his side. It was in Karzai's interest to eliminate rivals from the race, as the presence of many on the ballot presented an active risk that the elections might move to a second round. The only threat to Karzai's reelection was the possibility of a

forced run-off and subsequent alliances between his opponents. The U.S. embassy's interactions with opposition candidates coupled with a belief in the Karzai camp that the U.S. was against him, furthered the fear that a run-off election was the first step in a plan to defeat him.

After Ambassador Eikenberry's visits to rival candidates, Karzai's government grew more wary of the U.S. intentions in the electoral politics of Afghanistan. The President's spokesperson called the Ambassador's visits a "direct interference."<sup>127</sup> Karzai himself publically objected to the Eikenberry-Abdullah press conference.<sup>128</sup> He criticized Abdullah for raising the issue of changing Afghanistan's presidential system to a parliamentary system while sitting alongside the U.S. Ambassador.<sup>129</sup> Karzai also expressed concerns that since Ambassador Eikenberry did not comment on Abdullah's proposition to change the system, it could be interpreted that Abdullah's proposition had U.S. support.<sup>130</sup> The incumbent called the matter "extremely sensitive."<sup>131</sup> The Karzai government's reactions to Ambassador Eikenberry's visits signaled their distrust of stated U.S. neutrality in the race.

Despite these concerns over U.S. intentions, Karzai and his campaign also projected that he was the natural choice of the international community, and specifically the U.S., since no stronger candidate had emerged.<sup>132</sup> Karzai pursued this strategy perhaps because some Afghan voters were likely to be concerned about electing any candidate that they believed may not be supported by the international community.<sup>133</sup>

## SHIFTING MOMENTUM

As the campaign process evolved, the top campaigns and candidates displayed remarkable electoral maturity, despite the fact that the 2009 presidential election was only the second such vote held in Afghanistan. While the ballot officially included over three dozen people, the race had narrowed to a battle between Abdullah Abdullah and Karzai by the time the official campaign period began on June 16, 2009. This contest

brought to the forefront a reminder of what had been achieved over the past years, a focus that was championed by Karzai's campaign. A discussion on what has gone wrong, or could be done in the future, led by candidates such as Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani was also the hallmark of the campaign period.

Karzai relied heavily on traditional means of garnering votes. His campaign prioritized courting opinion leaders and power holders, with comparatively less focus on appealing directly to the population. As illustrated previously, by the time the campaign season arrived, Karzai had already built successful alliances that earned him the support of many of the most influential regional and national leaders, cementing his image as the clear favorite. His opponents such as Ashraf Ghani criticized the nature of some of the alliances and the promises made in return for reelection, accusing Karzai of "auctioning off" the future government.<sup>134</sup> Karzai's campaign responded to such criticism by arguing that Karzai wanted to make a nationally-inclusive partnership with major political figures of the country.<sup>135</sup>

Some of the competence of Karzai's campaign arose from a new and much less discussed nucleus in Afghan politics. The past eight-year-long effort in Afghanistan has created a significant and ambitious group of technocrats as part of the government. They form a political class that was largely inexistent before 2001, and incredibly well-resourced ever since. While not entirely united, many of them share a background of being formerly employed by international aid organizations or of being political and social activists in the 1990s. In this group there are known figures such as Minister of Education Ghulam Farooq Wardak, Minister of Interior Hanif Atmar, the head of the National Directorate of Security Amrullah Saleh, and Chief of Staff Omar Daudzai. This group is also enabled by dozens if not hundreds of other senior and midlevel government officials who have climbed through the ranks and built political networks. No senior members of this crowd moved out of the government to support any of Karzai's challengers. In fact, many of them were energized by the prospects of their own politi-

cal future to play key roles in Karzai's reelection effort.

Many in official positions avoided public campaigning. For some such as Atmar and Wardak, this was perhaps out of concerns that it would provoke allegations of using state resources in a candidates favor. Still, in several cases, those in official positions appeared to have significantly assisted the Karzai campaign effort. Farooq Wardak and others were reportedly instrumental in devising Karzai's broader electoral effort, and in general this class of politicians arguably formed the backbone of Karzai's campaign.<sup>136</sup> Some of them, such as the powerful director of the Independent Directorate of Local Governance, Jilani Popal, still remained in Karzai's camp, despite being close friends of other candidates (in Popal's case Ashraf Ghani).<sup>137</sup> The electoral process even mobilized elements of the government bureaucracy that had become inactive—such as former governor of Khost province, Arsala Jamal,<sup>138</sup> and the former governor of Paktika province, Akram Khpelwak.<sup>139</sup>

In addition to relying on this new political nucleus, the appointment of an elder, the more traditional leader Haji Din Mohammad, as Karzai's campaign chief was perhaps meant to ensure that the campaign had a representative who could deal with traditional elders from the provinces. Din Mohammad had assistance from several former and current governors and ministers such as Assadullah Khalid. Parallel to the Din Mohammad led campaign, Karzai's elder brother Mahmoud was in charge of another effort that was sometimes even more energetic than the official campaign structure. Mahmoud Karzai was influential in earning the support of most members of Afghanistan's Chamber of Commerce and Industries, and raising funds for the president's campaign.<sup>140</sup>

Abdullah Abdullah's effort was launched with a great deal of enthusiasm amongst his supporters, but lacked the political weight of Karzai's machinery. Most of his support came from within NF's leadership and his former associates in the Northern Alliance. Abdullah's campaign chairman,

Abdul Sattar Murad, was the former governor of Kapisa province whom Karzai had fired after he gave an interview to *Newsweek* in 2007 claiming there was a “vacuum of authority in parts of the country.”<sup>141</sup> Leaders such as former president Burhand-ud-Din Rabbani were also influential in the Abdullah ticket. However, more central to the operations of Abdullah’s campaign were the younger generation of aides to former Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud. Massoud’s brother Ahmad Wali, and former aides Muhaiuddin Mehdi and Saleh Mohammad Rigistani played key roles in Abdullah’s effort.<sup>142</sup>

Abdullah began his campaign with a major focus on the media. His campaign secured hours of airtime to present Abdullah as the chief rival to Karzai and to criticize Karzai’s performance by accusing his government of corruption and disconnect from the public.<sup>143</sup> During the official campaign season, Abdullah also made numerous trips around the country and held rallies in many provinces. After every rally, his campaign produced video clips capturing the enthusiasm of his supporters; these clips aired on many of the most watched channels in Afghanistan. Abdullah also gave speeches in Pashto to expand his appeal beyond his traditional Dari-speaking base.<sup>144</sup>

Abdullah’s campaign themes were largely evocative of President Obama’s 2008 campaign. His posters frequently displayed the words “hope” and “change.” One of Abdullah’s messages read: “I am asking you to believe, not only in my ability to bring about necessary change and hope in our beloved country, Afghanistan, but I am also asking you to believe in your own potential to change the course of history.”<sup>145</sup> This was almost a word-for-word replica of the message on President Obama’s 2008 campaign flyers and website.<sup>146</sup>

The clearest change Abdullah promised was altering the Afghan governance system from presidential to parliamentary, and later to a mix of presidential and parliamentary systems.<sup>147</sup> This required a major amendment to the constitution, a process that requires holding a Constitutional Loya Jirga. Abdullah also promised to change the constitution to allow for the election of provincial

governors, as opposed to their appointment by the central government.<sup>148</sup> Although these proposed changes were clearly stated, Abdullah’s campaign failed to present a clear plan for navigating the complex process required to alter Afghanistan’s Constitution and the constitutionally-mandated presidential system of governance.

Although Abdullah tried to recast himself in more national garb and started making frequent speeches in Pashto, it was clear during the campaign that Abdullah’s traditional and stronger base was amongst Afghanistan’s Dari-speaking Tajik population that lives mostly in northern, central, and western parts of the country. These areas were also more secure and thus were projected to have a higher voter turnout on election day. The belief that turnout would be higher in areas of Abdullah’s traditional support base and lower in the Pashtun-dominated areas of southern and eastern Afghanistan could be seen as the main reason for excitement in Abdullah’s camp. Yet these areas were also subject to serious contest by Karzai and his allies.

Karzai’s campaign entered the race with immense confidence, perhaps largely based on the assumption that no candidate had come forward who rivaled Karzai’s national stature or his ability to build as powerful an alliance. The campaign stressed that ordinary Afghans would see through the critical rhetoric of his rivals, and conclude that the previous eight years under Karzai had been the best that most parts of the country had seen in decades.<sup>149</sup> Karzai and his supporters frequently quoted statistics illustrating how many people had enrolled in schools or how many miles of new roads had been built under Karzai’s leadership.<sup>150</sup> Another key theme in Karzai’s campaign was his staunch opposition to some of the unpopular tactics used by foreign military forces, such as injudicious detentions and the use of heavy force resulting in civilian casualties.

Despite Karzai’s frontrunner status, Abdullah’s advances early on in the campaign period alarmed Karzai’s campaign.<sup>151</sup> In response, the Karzai camp adopted a strategy of tying Abdullah to the unpopular era of Afghanistan’s civil war in the

1990s.<sup>152</sup> During that time, Abdullah was a chief aide to one of the most prominent fighters, Ahmad Shah Massoud. Karzai's campaign promoted the belief that Karzai represented a move beyond the civil strife in which Abdullah's associates were deeply involved.<sup>153</sup> The merits of this argument were weak, especially since both of Karzai's running mates were in fact much bigger players in the civil war than Abdullah. Yet Karzai's communications apparatus meticulously reinforced Abdullah's image as a remnant of the civil war era.

The Karzai campaign's strategy of tying Abdullah to the scars of Afghanistan's bloody 1990s received a boost from an unlikely source. Speaking to the Abu Dhabi-based news outlet *The National*, Abdullah's campaign chief Sattar Murad warned that a Karzai victory in the first round would not be accepted, stating: "there will be a big demonstration, street demonstrations, and it will turn bad. The country will land in the middle of a crisis."<sup>154</sup> The same article also quoted an analyst in Kabul reacting to Murad's assertions saying: "If Abdullah says, 'I don't accept the outcome of the elections,' what will happen? We will not have peaceful demonstrations in Kabul like in Tehran or elsewhere. People will come with their Kalashnikovs. Every single home in Kabul has a gun."<sup>155</sup>

The Karzai campaign's communications director, Waheed Omer, held a press conference the day after *The National* interview was published, and he promoted the view that the Abdullah camp was prepared for violence if they did not succeed.<sup>156</sup> Karzai's Interior Ministry issued a statement on the same theme and attributed the talk of "Kalashnikovs" to Murad rather than the analyst.<sup>157</sup> The Interior Ministry further warned that the government would not tolerate threats of violence.<sup>158</sup> Whether Omer and the interior ministry acted together is not known, but both of their media engagements and the coverage they received had a serious impact on putting Abdullah on the defensive.<sup>159</sup> Following the Murad gaffe, Karzai's representatives on television channels raised concerns about the prospect of chaos by recalling the violence that marred the country during the 1990s, and tied Abdullah to that prospect.

Abdullah had to assure people he did not represent violence and chaos, the result of his campaign chief's inappropriate and untimely statement and Karzai's shrewd response. Regardless of his attempts, the debate remained central in the final weeks of the campaign period with the Karzai camp actively reminding people of what Murad had told *The National*. The momentum had shifted back towards Karzai, and Afghanistan's new media environment was sharply utilized to that end.

## THE AFGHAN MEDIA AND TELEVISED DEBATES

Afghanistan had no television stations in 2001. Today, however, there are over twenty private television channels and twice as many radio stations. Electricity is a rare commodity in most parts of the country, but people are increasingly finding ways to tune to their favorite media channels, using everything from inexpensive Chinese batteries to micro hydro-electricity and fuel-intensive generators. The election scene invited widespread interest, and media channels profited from it.

The U.S. presidential election in 2008 and the Iranian presidential election of June 2009 inspired the media scene in Afghanistan. New channels learned lessons on how to cover elections. Campaigns saw examples of how television, radio and even internet could be utilized to rally supporters and transmit messages.<sup>160</sup> Both the Abdullah and Karzai campaigns spent heavily to air their views.<sup>161</sup> Some channels, such as the market leader *Tolo TV* and the all Pashto channel *Shamshad TV* experienced perhaps the most lucrative period of their existence.

Public interest in the media coverage of the elections was high. Programs such as *Tolo TV*'s nightly talk show "Intekhabat 88" (Elections 88) emerged as the preferred avenue for discussion of candidate platforms, as well as electoral progress between candidate representatives. Interest was so high that the channel's owners ran several versions of the talk show with different participants on different times of the day.

The idea of televised debates between candidates

was also new to Afghanistan's young electoral system. Again, inspired by the U.S. 2008 and Iranian 2009 debates, several channels organized such platforms for the candidates. Many of the debates were poorly organized and, at times, not attended by the main candidates—Karzai, Abdullah, and even Ashraf Ghani. But at least two debates were significant for Afghanistan's democratic development. On June 24, 2009, *Tolo TV* hosted a debate to which they had invited Karzai, Abdullah and Ghani. When Karzai refused to take part, the channel's producers placed an empty podium where Karzai would have stood and constantly reminded the audience that they had asked him to participate. Abdullah and Ghani had a rather cordial discussion, and gave the image that both of them were running against Karzai rather than each other.<sup>162</sup>

Karzai's campaign alleged that *Tolo TV* was biased against them.<sup>163</sup> They also declared that they would not take part in any debate that singled out candidates as opposed to giving every candidate—including all forty registered candidates—the chance to present their platforms.<sup>164</sup> Such a stance was in line with Karzai's apparent campaign strategy to avoid differentiating Ghani and Abdullah from the rest of the forty candidates, some of whom were so bizarre that associating anyone of Abdullah's and Ghani's caliber with them was an insult.

Eventually, Karzai did take part in a debate. His campaign proposed the idea of a debate to be held between the four leading candidates—as an internal *Tolo* survey had shown that there in fact were four leading candidates—Karzai, Abdullah, Bashardost, and Ghani.<sup>165</sup> The debate was to air on any channel that wished to broadcast it, and to be co-hosted by the state run *Radio Television Afghanistan* and the U.S.-funded *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. Staged during the very last week of the campaign period, Karzai, Ghani, and Bashardost attended.<sup>166</sup> Abdullah rejected the invitation, suggesting he had last minute trip to the provinces, but this also implied that he wanted to reciprocate Karzai's refusal to debate him early in the race on *Tolo TV*.<sup>167</sup>

Another notable advance during the campaign process was a national discussion on the role of women in politics and society. Almost all candidates devised strategies to reach out to female voters, especially the top four candidates. They held rallies and town-hall style gatherings with women activists and voters.<sup>168</sup> Many candidates, including Abdullah and Karzai, sent women representatives to talk shows and public discussions. There were also several active civil society efforts to mobilize female voters. Most prominent amongst this activism was the "Five Million Women Vote Campaign," an effort launched by a network of women rights activists.<sup>169</sup> Two female candidates were also on the ballot, and candidate Ramazan Bashardost ran with a female vice president nominee. Furthermore, television channels organized debates between candidates specifically focused on their policies regarding women rights. Despite these efforts, critics deemed the discussion on women rights inadequate—and much of the female participation in the process was impacted by the security conditions in the country.<sup>170</sup>

Earlier, Abdullah, Ashraf Ghani, and Bashardost had overshadowed Karzai's presence in the media.<sup>171</sup> Yet during the final three weeks before the election day, Karzai became more visible on air and in public. His increased public presence, coupled with the damage inflicted on Abdullah's momentum by the fallout of his campaign chief's misplaced statement to *The National*, reestablished Karzai as the frontrunner in the race.

This shift in momentum towards Karzai became clear after a carefully choreographed trip to attend a rally in the northern province of Baghlan on August 1, 2009.<sup>172</sup> Although northern Afghanistan was considered to be Abdullah's traditional base, Karzai's ally in the province, the Ismaeli leader Said Mansur Naderi, attracted a crowd that had walked hours to come to the rally site and numbered in tens of thousands.<sup>173</sup> Karzai struck a confident image and talked of his achievements in building more roads, in increasing the number of students enrolled in schools and universities, and in increasing the amount of money in the national reserve.<sup>174</sup> Several other rallies were also held in the period of less than ten days before the end of

the campaign season, including ones in Herat, Paktia and Kabul. They were widely attended, and the Karzai campaign’s media structure promoted them on primetime television every evening as the mark of Karzai’s continued popularity.

Despite the increased momentum, the last opinion polls released before the August elections suggested that Karzai’s chances of averting a run-off did not look good. A poll conducted between July 16 and July 26, 2009 by the International Republican Institute (IRI), and released a week before the elections, showed Karzai had forty-four percent of the vote, far ahead of any of his challengers, but at least six points below victory in the first round.<sup>175</sup> This poll, however, was conducted before Karzai’s public rallies began, and before the damage done to Abdullah by his campaign chief’s statement, and Karzai campaign’s exploitation of it by tying Abdullah to the 1990s civil war.

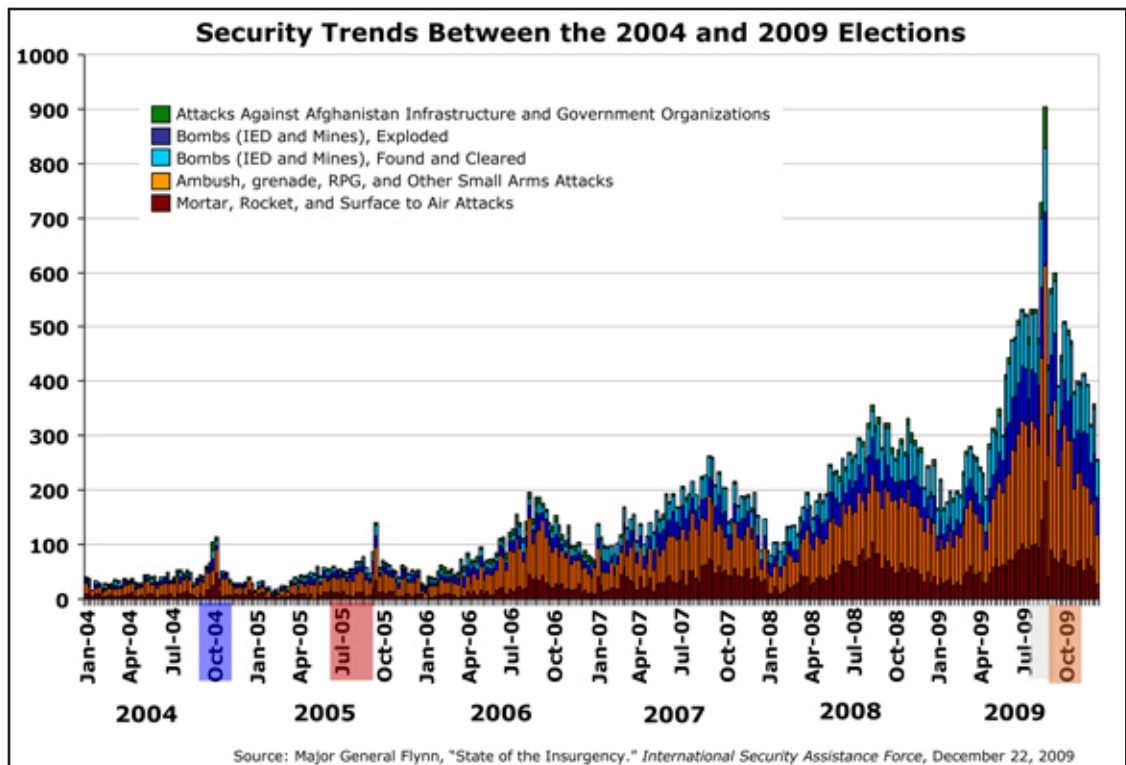
By the time the campaign period concluded, it had displayed a promising level of political maturity emerging in Afghanistan. A vital awareness of the achievements since 2001 was created. Oppor-

tunities squandered were publically noted. The openings and threats ahead were acknowledged. Overall, greater public buy-in to the political process was secured, despite the severe security challenges.

**THE INSURGENCY: INTIMIDATION AND DISRUPTION**

It was expected that insurgents would attempt to disrupt the elections. Taliban commanders warned Afghans against voting in 2004, but on that election day, they failed to have serious impact on process.<sup>176</sup> At that time, they were a weakened force preparing for a return. In 2009, however, the insurgency was at its strongest since 2001.

The insurgent threat to the 2009 elections was much more serious, partially because insurgents had gained access to large swaths of territory inside Afghanistan. In April 2009, the Ministry of Interior had recognized ten districts (out of 364 official districts) as completely under insurgent control, and around a hundred and fifty districts



GRAPH 1 - SECURITY TRENDS



as contested.<sup>177</sup> Holding elections amidst such heightened insurgent activity was a risky enterprise.

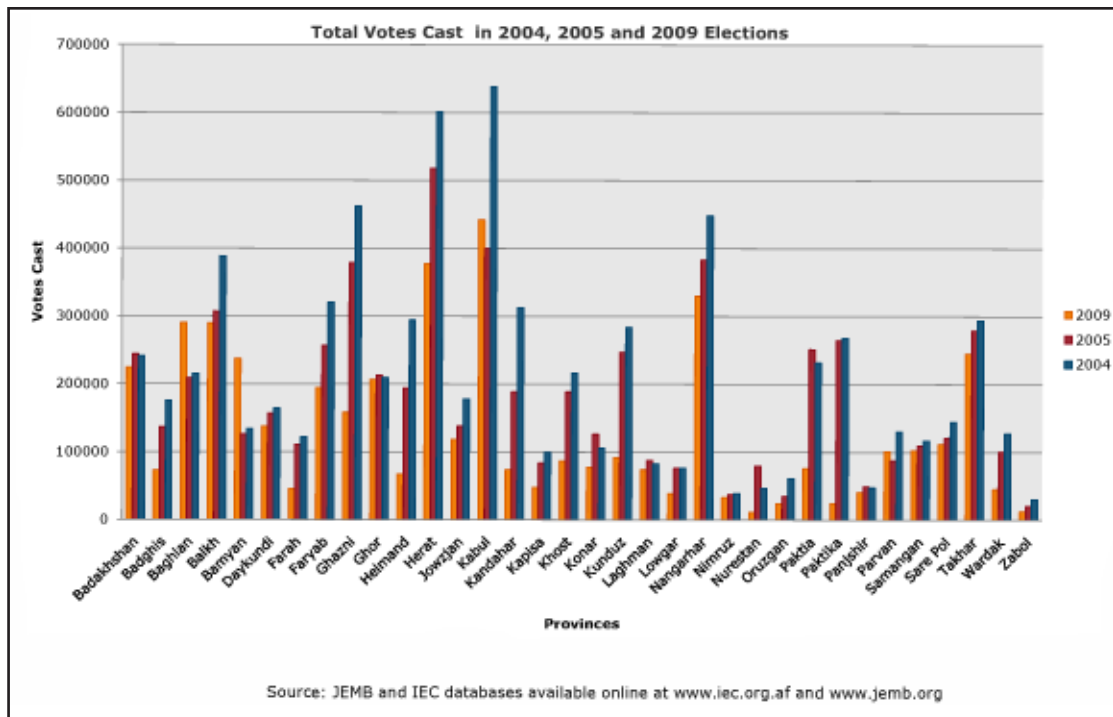
With international attention focused on the election, and many policy options resting on its outcome, the insurgents also attached high stakes to the vote. They released a statement on July 30, 2009 calling the elections a “deceiving American plan” and that “all mujahedeen [insurgents] should strongly focus on making this process fail ... strike the enemy’s bases and stop people from taking part in the election.”<sup>178</sup>

Voter intimidation and the disruption of administrative preparations for the elections were part of the insurgents’ campaign during the summer. IEC local employees were kidnapped or attacked on several occasions.<sup>179</sup> During the voter registration process, the insurgents seemed to have coordinated their intimidation campaigns with the IEC schedule, as they issued night letters in areas that IEC launched voter registration programs. In some parts of the country, they went around collecting thousands of voter registration cards from the population.<sup>180</sup> They did so perhaps either to deny people access to polls on election day or to

use the cards for other reasons, such as passing police checkpoints. More generally, intimidation tactics were believed to have reduced participation in the process.<sup>181</sup>

During the campaign season (June 16-August 16, 2009), candidate mobility was largely hampered by security concerns. The highest profile incident was the attack on Karzai’s running mate Marshal Fahim’s campaign convoy in the northern province of Kunduz. Abdullah lost two of his provincial campaign chiefs in Kapisa and Laghman provinces to violence, although it is hard to distinguish whether they were killed by insurgents or other feuds.<sup>182</sup> Despite the security challenges, the top five candidates (Karzai, Abdullah, Bashardost, Ashraf Ghani and Mirwais Yasini) made several major rallies and visited provinces such as Kandahar and Paktia, parts of which were considered to be seriously contested by the insurgents.

There were also attempts by government officials and intermediaries to make deals with parts of the insurgency and buy time for holding elections in the contested parts of southern and eastern Afghanistan. Closer to the elections, it was announced that in Kandahar province, Karzai’s



GRAPH 2 - VOTER TURNOUT

brother Ahmad Wali had succeeded in striking a ceasefire agreement with insurgents for election day.<sup>183</sup> However, as August 20, 2009 neared, intimidation soared. Leaflets were distributed in many parts of the country, and threatening letters were sent to election-related institutions even in Kabul.<sup>184</sup> A Hizb-e-Islami Hekmatyar night letter circulated in Wardak province before the elections read:

*Muslim compatriots: the conscience of the zealous Afghan Muslim does not allow it to ignore the merciless assault of the enemy on his religion, land and chastity and take part in the ridiculous drama of elections, and involve himself in the crime of shedding the blood of thousands of compatriots and assaulting the chastity of thousands of Afghan girls. It is incumbent upon you to, by boycotting these elections, reject involvement with this crime and protect yourself from the dangers associated with it.*

*Salah-u-din Ayuibi Front, Hizb-e-Islami Afghanistan*<sup>185</sup>

On August 18, 2009, Afghanistan’s National Security Council and Foreign Ministry issued a

directive asking media outlets to avoid coverage of violence on election day.<sup>186</sup> The directive was met with a mixed response. It was interpreted as either the government’s anticipation of serious security incidents on election day, or an attempt to deter the insurgent attacks by denying them the media coverage they desired. Other concerns, such as the likelihood that the directive would create a vacuum in public information and thus put more lives at risk during the voting day were also raised. There were also questions about how the government’s directive was a hindrance to press freedom.<sup>187</sup>

### ELECTION DAY

On the day of the election, voting in Kabul appeared to have started calmly. President Karzai voted in a polling center at Amani High School, adjacent to the palace, and called on Afghans to brave insurgent threats and vote.<sup>188</sup> Abdullah Abdullah and his wife voted in the Kartai Parwan area of Kabul, where he lives. The process seemed to be going well and many believed that the vote would be a show of resolve against insurgent threats. Yet elsewhere in most parts of the country, security incidents in the early hours of the day had a significant impact on the vote. Insurgents staged a coordinated series of rocket and grenade attacks on polling centers, specifically in the South and East of Afghanistan.<sup>189</sup> Most of the attacks occurred between the early morning hours of 6am and 9am, indicating the insurgents aimed to impact turnout before the polls even opened.<sup>190</sup> These attacks, coupled with prior intimidation, reduced voter participation.

Rockets as the main weapon of insurgents on election day seemed unanticipated. The precautions for election day included several belts of security provided primarily by Afghan forces, with back-up from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).<sup>191</sup> Also, in the capital and main provinces, entry to electoral sites was heavily guarded and people were screened by metal detectors before entering the sites. Given the security measures, the insurgents knowingly chose to keep some distance away from the sites, and yet still cause disruption by launching rockets.

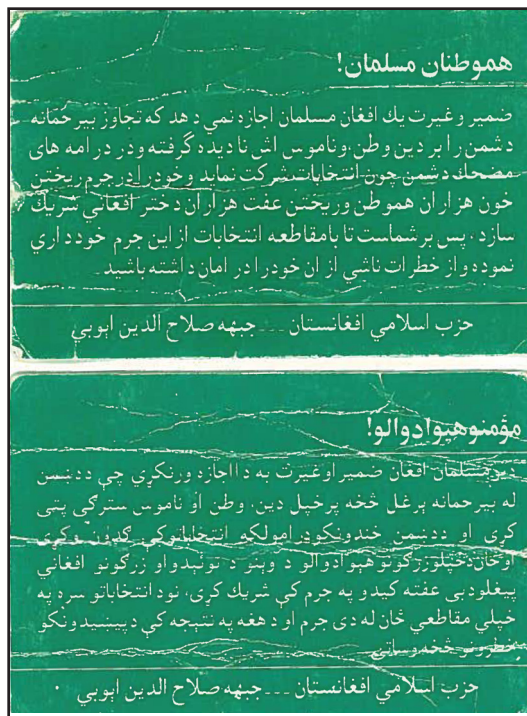


FIGURE 3 - A NIGHT LETTER CIRCULATED IN WARDAK PROVINCE

Local reporting on the insurgent activity was unreliable since many outlets had been directed by the government not to cover violent incidents.<sup>192</sup> Most local media followed the government's directive, with a few exceptions, such as the Pajhwok newswire service.<sup>193</sup> Until the mid-afternoon, near the end of the voting hours, major TV channels focused on the widespread problem of broken hole punches required to mark voter cards, general voter turnout, and commentaries and coverage of major candidates casting their ballots. Only early in the afternoon did Afghan TV channels begin to report on incidents of violence.<sup>194</sup> Foreign media, however, was more open about reporting security incidents. *BBC Online*, for example, ran a live commentary on the election, where *BBC* journalists and other analysts reported on security incidents and debated the impact of violence on voter turnout.<sup>195</sup> Still, the media restrictions limited overall awareness of how widespread the attacks were. Subsequent government reports indicated roughly twenty civilians and Afghan security forces were killed on election day, and around forty more were wounded.<sup>196</sup>

Several measures were taken during the 2009 vote to limit irregularities and fraud.<sup>197</sup> The first was the use of indelible ink to mark a voter's index finger to deter multiple voting attempts.<sup>198</sup> In some parts of the country in 2004, reports indicated that indelible ink was easily removable.<sup>199</sup> During the 2009 vote, many voters tried to test the ink as they were aware of the 2004 controversy—perhaps with the intent to either vote multiple times, or simply check the claims that the ink was of much higher quality this time around.<sup>200</sup> During the morning hours, there were claims that the ink was not indelible. While the IEC took notice of the issue, it informed the public early in the day that the ink had the ability to resurface after washing. Generally, the ink in 2009 was not an issue as it had been in 2004, despite some reports of its disappearance after washing.<sup>201</sup>

Yet the ink did have a problematic role since insurgents could identify people who voted, and thus punish them. In one reported incident during the election day, insurgents cut off two voter fingers marked by the indelible ink in Kandahar

province's Arghandab district.<sup>202</sup>

Election observers were also employed to monitor the process. In total, there were almost eight thousand domestic and foreign observers around the country. The Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA), the main domestic observer group, deployed over 7,000 people across all provinces, though their coverage varied per province based on perceptions of security.<sup>203</sup> In addition to this large domestic observer presence, there were roughly three hundred foreign observers present for the vote.

The United States sponsored four observer missions, led by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), Democracy International (DI), and the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL).<sup>204</sup> At least two of the U.S.-based institutions, IRI and NDI also fielded separate teams of locals to observe the elections.<sup>205</sup> The European Union Election Observation Mission (EUEOM) consisted of around sixty observers and analysts.<sup>206</sup> The international observers generally faced a challenging security environment, and in most cases, their access and movement were limited due to security concerns.

## ABDULLAH AND KARZAI CLAIM VICTORY

In the immediate wake of the election, the precise date for announcement of preliminary results was unknown and the climate was one of uncertainty.

Upon completion of the vote, the procedure in place required that all votes would be counted inside the polling centers and that the results would be made public by displaying a copy of the results sheet outside every polling station.<sup>207</sup> The results sheet would then be sent to Kabul, where it would be tallied along with the returns from around the country.<sup>208</sup> At least one candidate representative per polling center could also receive a copy of the results sheet.<sup>209</sup> Based on the announced timeline, preliminary results were expected to be released between September 2 and 16, 2009. According to the tallying procedure, the results were to be

finalized by September 17, 2009, and a run-off date set on that day should it be necessary.<sup>210</sup> But just twenty-four hours after polls opened, both the Karzai and Abdullah campaigns claimed victory.<sup>211</sup>

On August 21, 2009, Karzai's campaign chief Haji Din Mohammad publicly stated that "our figures show that we have enough votes to win, so no need for a second round of voting."<sup>212</sup> Abdullah's campaign spokesperson, Fazil Sancharaki, refuted Din Mohammad's claim by announcing that their figures showed Abdullah had received sixty-two percent of the vote.<sup>213</sup> The IEC quickly responded that neither claim was factual, and that only the IEC could release official results.<sup>214</sup> This statement did not stop representatives of candidates from claiming victory—as Karzai's finance minister, Omar Zakhilwal told a group of journalists at his home on August 25, 2009 that Karzai had won the race with sixty-eight percent of the vote.<sup>215</sup>

## OBSERVER REPORTS AND THE HOLBROOKE CONTROVERSY

The day after the election was critical. Not only because both camps claimed victory, but also because the U.S. Special Representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, held a contentious meeting with President Karzai.<sup>216</sup> While much speculation persists about the topics of discussion at the meeting, subsequent recollections of the event—including one by Holbrooke himself in a letter to the editors of the *Washington Post*—confirm that Holbrooke discussed the idea of a second-round vote.<sup>217</sup> The suggestion was not well-received by President Karzai, who was convinced that he had won the vote and was concerned that the U.S. intended to deny him that victory.<sup>218</sup>

The U.S. saw a second round (run-off) election as a measure that could "ensure legitimacy" of the new government.<sup>219</sup> Yet the assumption that a second round vote would bestow legitimacy was deeply flawed,<sup>220</sup> particularly as most Afghans were more concerned about the outcome than the

process, and preferred an end to the uncertainty that the electoral process had caused.<sup>221</sup> The second round was likely to produce the same results, as there was broad agreement that Karzai was more than likely to win it.<sup>222</sup> While it was too early to understand what the Afghan public desired, it was also untimely and problematic to raise the issue of a second round that early in the process, especially given that the early statements issued by international observers on August 22, 2009 were cautious but positive.<sup>223</sup>

All of the international observer groups, with the exception of IRI, issued statements two days after the vote. NDI issued a statement saying "aspects of the 2009 elections were in accordance with democratic principles...the elections, however, also involved serious flaws that must be addressed in order to build greater confidence in the integrity of future elections."<sup>224</sup> The EUEOM delegation called the election fair, but not free in some part of the country due to violence and intimidation.<sup>225</sup> Their statement noted that "we can say it is a victory, a victory for the Afghan people."<sup>226</sup> IRI had issued a statement the previous day, on August 21, 2009 saying, "unfortunately, such issues as lower turnout, fraud and abuse of state resources brought these elections to a lower standard than the 2004 and 2005 Afghan elections observed by IRI. Nevertheless, given Afghanistan's circumstances, and based on what IRI observers witnessed in the first three of the five parts of the elections, the process so far has been credible."<sup>227</sup> IRI also noted that there were "well-trained, highly motivated election officials at polling stations."<sup>228</sup>

The domestic observer group, FEFA, avoided commenting on the nature of the vote or the level of fraud or irregularities. Their statement applauded the efforts of security forces for doing a good job despite the challenges, but highlighted the possibly disastrous impact that insecurity may have had on the vote.<sup>229</sup> FEFA observed that the process was marred by a "lack of impartiality" in IEC staff, and that this shortcoming needed to be addressed in order for the process to be considered credible.<sup>230</sup> FEFA representatives, as well as international observer missions, stated that the

electoral process did not end on election day, but that the sensitive and crucial phase of tallying and certifying the results was key to the credibility of the process.<sup>231</sup> FEFA, like the international observer groups, called the electoral process as a whole a victory for the Afghan people against threats and intimidation by insurgents, and that it was another reminder that Afghans wanted to institutionalize democracy in Afghanistan.<sup>232</sup>

While FEFA's coverage was not universal due to security challenges, international observers had an even more limited picture of what happened on election day. Glenn Cowan of Democracy International, whose group fielded sixty-two observers, remarked on August 24, 2009, that "we don't have a sense of the scope of the problem and we don't have a sense of the scale of problem...we know as little now as we did on Wednesday [the day before the election] other than some people in some places got to go out and voted."<sup>233</sup> To their credit, DI's post-election statement emphasized the fact that it was too early to tell whether the election was credible or not.<sup>234</sup> While DI had been cautious in their statements and refrained from making quick judgments, questions of major fraud and irregularities soon surfaced and put other international observers in a more difficult position.

On August 23, 2009, Abdullah held a press conference in which he alleged that Karzai used the Afghan state apparatus to "rig" the elections.<sup>235</sup> He blamed Karzai entirely for electoral irregularities and fraud, arguing that it all happened "under his eyes and his leadership."<sup>236</sup> Nearly simultaneously, a Member of Parliament from Kandahar province who had supported Abdullah, Malalai Ishaqzai, used the *Tolo TV's* afternoon session of "Intekhabat 88" to allege major fraud in Kandahar. Ishaqzai claimed that while many were denied the right to vote because of insecurity, votes were still cast in their names.<sup>237</sup> From this point on, talk of fraud and major irregularities only increased, despite the Karzai campaign's attempts to reject such claims and label them as desperate attempts by the election's losers.<sup>238</sup>

The public debate over fraud and irregularities

had a worrying ethno-geographic tone. Abdullah's camp accused the Karzai campaign of ballot stuffing in the largely insecure Pashtun areas of the country, in southern and southeastern Afghanistan.<sup>239</sup> Karzai's supporters in those areas often reacted by holding rallies or gatherings, alleging that their votes were being disrespected.<sup>240</sup> During some of these rallies, including one in Paktia in early September, participants warned that if foreign pressure led to a run-off vote, they would not participate.<sup>241</sup> Television and radio stations remained focused on the subject of fraud, and both camps had numerous speakers making claims and counter-claims.<sup>242</sup> International media was also focused on the subject of fraud and irregularities, which made their coverage appear sympathetic to Abdullah's claims. This angered the Karzai campaign. Waheed Omer, Karzai's campaign spokesperson, remarked that "this is an all out propaganda war that is undermining the process of the ECC [the Electoral Complaint Commission] by bypassing the legal institutions and making it an all out media campaign."<sup>243</sup>

The coverage of international media outlets often determined the debates in local press and broadcast stations. There were several evenings when the flagship televised program of the electoral process, *Intekhabat 88*, would be focused on what international media outlets, like *The Washington Post*, *The Times of London*, or *The New York Times* wrote about fraud and irregularities. *The New York Times* reported on September 1, 2009 that elders from the Bariz tribe in Kandahar province claimed that roughly 23,000 votes were forged in their names and cast for Karzai.<sup>244</sup> Local television programs focused on this subject, with the pro-Karzai stations scolding international media for "interference," and the pro-Abdullah channels using stories such as the one in *The New York Times* to bolster their claims.<sup>245</sup> In much of this debate, Abdullah's representatives were on the offensive by alleging fraud was committed by Karzai, whereas Karzai's allies were placed on the defensive and continuously denied such claims.<sup>246</sup> Others alleged more widespread corruption, as seen in supporters of Ashraf Ghani claiming that both Abdullah's and Karzai's camps committed fraud.<sup>247</sup>

Karzai's supporters increasingly interpreted international actors, and particularly the U.S., as bent on denying their leader a victory. This perception was fueled by the leak of Holbrooke's tense meeting with President Karzai and the subsequent focus of the international press on fraud and irregularities concentrating almost exclusively on Karzai. The tense relationship between the incumbent's government and the foreign presence in the country only seemed to deteriorate in the wake of the vote. For several evenings after the August 20<sup>th</sup> election and amid the continuing discourse of fraud, the state television network, Radio Television Afghanistan, broadcast frequent segments in which there were previously unknown commentators unanimously agreeing that the source of problems and political instability in the country was "foreigners."<sup>248</sup>

## RELEASE OF OFFICIAL RESULTS

In this turbulent post-election environment, the IEC decided to announce preliminary results in increments, starting on August 25, 2009. Going into August 20<sup>th</sup>, IEC had informed observers that the results would be announced only when there was a nationally representative tally of votes counted.<sup>249</sup> This was because a disproportionate number of votes from one province or another could create problematic results and public responses. The ten percent of results announced on August 25, 2009 showed a close race, with Karzai at 40.6 percent and Abdullah at 38.7 percent of the tally.<sup>250</sup> But as further results were announced—almost daily at five o'clock in the evening at the Kabul Intercontinental Hotel—the gap between the candidates widened, with Karzai securing a greater share of the votes.<sup>251</sup>

The results of almost half of the votes cast were announced on August 29, 2009, and Karzai led with forty-six percent of the vote, compared to Abdullah's thirty-one percent.<sup>252</sup> As Karzai's lead grew, some of Abdullah's representatives alleged on television programs that the IEC was engineering the announcement of the results to prepare the public for the eventual declaration that Karzai's tally had moved above the fifty

percent plus one vote required for victory.<sup>253</sup>

The IEC responded by referencing a technical analysis concerning the provincial origin of the added votes suggesting that the potential Abdullah strongholds had been counted earlier, partly due to their proximity and access to the capital, where the votes were tallied.<sup>254</sup>

As the results emerged, allegations of fraud and irregularities also continued to surface. On September 2, 2009, the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC), a mixed U.N. and Afghan-staffed commission tasked with investigating and adjudicating complaints, announced that they had received 2,654 complaints about fraud and irregularities in the process. This figure included complaints for both the presidential elections and provincial council elections, which were held concurrently.<sup>255</sup>

On September 8, 2009, the IEC announced preliminary results suggesting Karzai had won.<sup>256</sup> The eight-year anniversary of the assassination of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the anti-Taliban resistance leader killed by Al Qaeda on September 9, 2001, was the day after the IEC announced results that declared Karzai above the required fifty percent plus one vote.<sup>257</sup> Since Abdullah's supporters were closely associated with Massoud and his campaign used Massoud's image, the concern was that results announced before his anniversary might lead to violence or demonstrations on the anniversary occasion. Yet, Massoud's anniversary went ahead without any significant security incidents or public demonstrations, with the exception of convoys of mourners organized by both Abdullah and Karzai that travelled in and around Kabul.

On September 16, 2009, the day that the electoral process required the release of certified results, the IEC finally announced the preliminary results of all the votes cast in the election.<sup>258</sup> Based on the IEC's numbers, Karzai had won 54.6 percent and Abdullah had secured 27.8 percent of the vote.<sup>259</sup> These numbers were still subject to the ECC adjudication process. The European Union's observer delegation preempted the announcement of the results by holding a press conference in which they alleged that 1.5 million of the votes counted were

“suspicious.”<sup>260</sup> President Karzai called the EU claim “irresponsible,”<sup>261</sup> and his campaign issued a statement saying: “Hamid Karzai’s election campaign team believes today’s announcement of the number of suspected votes by the head and deputy head of EU election monitoring commission is partial, irresponsible and in contradiction with Afghanistan’s constitution.”<sup>262</sup>

The EUEOM claims further intensified what was becoming a public dispute between Karzai and the international organizations in Afghanistan. The biography of the EUEOM delegation’s leader did not help assuage concerns within Karzai’s campaign that the international community was working against him. EUEOM delegation leader General Philippe Morillon was closely associated with Abdullah, as he had written a book on Masoud and was also linked with the Massoud Foundation, an organization Abdullah and his advisor Wali Massoud chaired.<sup>263</sup>

Just as the controversy surrounding the EU statements came to a head, a clash inside the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) over how to approach the allegations of fraud also surfaced. Before the September 8, 2009 announcement of results giving Karzai more than fifty percent of the vote, the UNAMA deputy head Peter Galbraith had attempted to block the announcement, and on September 16, 2009, he was ordered on temporary leave because of his disagreement with UNAMA chief Kai Eide.<sup>264</sup> Initially it was reported that the move was undertaken because Galbraith had advocated a more public and extensive role by the UN in investigating claims of fraud, which Kai Eide overruled.<sup>265</sup> Later reports, including a December 17, 2009 *New York Times* article, suggested Galbraith had more elaborate intentions—such as orchestrating a plan to replace Karzai.<sup>266</sup> Galbraith was fired by UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon on September 30, 2009.<sup>267</sup> Following Galbraith’s departure from Kabul, he continued to comment publically about the extent of fraud during the election.<sup>268</sup> His public statements had significant impact on international policy makers and public attitude towards the elections.<sup>269</sup>

The ECC began the adjudication process in a politically charged environment. The five-member commission was staffed by three UN-appointed members—one Canadian, one American, and one Dutch citizen—and two Afghans. The Afghan Supreme Court had nominated an employee, Maulawi Mustafa Barikzai, and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission had nominated another, Commissioner Fahim Hakim, as members of ECC.<sup>270</sup> Abdullah Abdullah pressed the ECC for strict rulings.<sup>271</sup> The Karzai camp rejected claims of fraud, and though they initially welcomed the audit process, they grew increasingly wary of the ECC’s work.<sup>272</sup> During the electoral process, it had become obvious that the incumbent exercised considerable influence over the IEC. The ECC, by virtue of its mixed composition, was likely to be more resistant to any such influence. The ECC began conducting its audit against the backdrop of the EUEOM’s statement alleging over 1.5 million votes were fraudulent, as well as the controversy surrounding Galbraith’s dismissal.

## THE AUDIT PROMPTS A RUN-OFF

Upon commencement of the audit process, the number of fraud and irregularity-related complaints from all over the country had risen to almost three thousand.<sup>273</sup> These complaints comprised both the presidential and provincial council votes. The ECC declared on September 8, 2009 that more than 700 of the complaints it had received were “Category A”; that is, of a nature that could affect the preliminary result as announced by the IEC. The commission had determined that around 3,377 polling centers were suspect.<sup>274</sup> Time constraints, inadequate staffing, and limited mobility were cited amongst the reasons to compel the ECC to adopt a sampling approach to the audit.<sup>275</sup> Under this method, the commission audited a ten percent, random sample of the suspect polling centers.<sup>276</sup>

As it became more likely that the results of the audit would be unfavorable to Karzai, Maulawi Mustafa Barikzai, one of the ECC’s Afghan members, resigned on October 12, 2009.<sup>277</sup> Barikzai,

who had been appointed by the Supreme Court and was reportedly allied with Karzai, alleged “foreign interference” in the process as the reason for his departure.<sup>278</sup> The public reason presented by Barikzai was curious, as he had already known beforehand that the ECC process, while mandated by Afghan law, was nonetheless a fusion of Afghan and international efforts. The ECC announced its disappointment with Barikzai’s resignation, but assured that the process would not be “distracted.”<sup>279</sup> Eventually, Karzai rejected Barikzai’s resignation,<sup>280</sup> releasing a statement saying: “With full recognition of your concerns and respect to your views; and appreciating your sincere services, I expect you to continue your duties. I consider this in the best interest of the Afghan nation and urge the Election Complaint Commission to make effort to address your concerns.”<sup>281</sup> Regardless, Barikzai’s move had achieved what seemed the intended goal of publicly questioning the methods and independence of the ECC, and thus paving the way for any eventual Karzai objection to ECC rulings.

The tense political environment peaked during the third week of October 2009. As international press reports suggested the ECC audit would lead to a run-off,<sup>282</sup> the major concern was whether Karzai would accept the prospect of a run-off if mandated by the ECC.<sup>283</sup> Said Tayeb Jawad, the Afghan ambassador in Washington, declared in a public briefing on October 16, 2009 that “a run-off is a likely scenario.”<sup>284</sup> Yet, only days later, Karzai’s campaign spokesperson Waheed Omer said, “We think the process will not result in [a run-off] unless there is a political decision, in which case obviously we will react to it politically. If there is a second round based on a political deal between anyone, then obviously the people have the right to say, ‘You didn’t take our vote seriously the first time, why should we vote a second time?’”<sup>285</sup>

During the late afternoon of October 18, 2009, the ECC released the results of its audit in a series of technical statements posted on its website.<sup>286</sup> According to the ECC ruling, Karzai obtained 48.3 percent of the vote, and Abdullah secured 31.5 percent.<sup>287</sup> The audit had deemed as fraudu-

lent 950,000 votes reported for Karzai, and 190,000 votes reported for Abdullah.<sup>288</sup> The audit process prompted a run-off, which was the outcome Karzai had fervently sought to avoid.<sup>289</sup>

## THE LAST MAN STANDING

It was not clear whether Karzai would accept the announcement that his votes were below fifty percent. Though the final certified results were slated to be announced by the IEC, the ECC preempted any potential manipulation of its decision by publishing their findings on their website.<sup>290</sup> The ECC’s decision to announce their findings could be interpreted as a result of concerns that Karzai would reject their decision, and that he would pressure the IEC to announce final figures that pushed him beyond the electoral threshold, and thus avoid a run-off.<sup>291</sup> The IEC was indeed reluctant to accept the decision of the ECC and the announcement of a run-off, and the final figure they announced on October 19, 2009 was different than the one calculated by ECC and independently by DI.<sup>292</sup> Although the ECC and DI had calculated that Karzai received 48.3 percent of the vote, the IEC announced his total as 49.7 percent after the audit, only .4 percent short of a first round victory.<sup>293</sup>

A run-off in the event that no candidate secures fifty percent plus one vote is a constitutional requirement. Yet by staging tactical maneuvers as outlined above, Karzai had brought himself to a position where a major international diplomatic effort was needed to convince him to accept the run-off. Furthermore, the international community had failed to disengage themselves from the run-off discussions, and thus the whole idea of a run-off elections was perceived as a foreign agenda. French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner visited Kabul to confer with Karzai and to urge him to accept the ECC rulings.<sup>294</sup> Senator John Kerry, who was on a fact-finding mission to the region, tried to convince Karzai that the ECC rulings were lawful and a run-off was necessary.<sup>295</sup> The former U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. and Kabul, Zalmay Khalilzad, also arrived in town to help avert a possible crisis should Karzai refuse to



accept the ECC ruling.<sup>296</sup>

On October 20, 2009, Karzai and Kerry appeared alongside the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan and the U.S. Special Representative in a press conference to announce that he had accepted the ECC ruling on the run-off.<sup>297</sup> Subsequent reports suggested that the U.S. had to assert significant pressure on Karzai to accept the prospect of a run-off election.<sup>298</sup> While this diplomatic push could be seen as pressuring Karzai, it was also an unusual episode of expending a great deal of international political capital on a matter with arguably less valuable outcome for it was clear that Karzai was likely to win the second round.<sup>299</sup>

During the press conference with Kerry, Karzai did not concede that fraud was the reason for the run-off election, saying only: “The voters are not to blame. Why their votes were disrespected, should be thoroughly investigated. But it is not the right time to discuss this.”<sup>300</sup> Just before the press conference, the IEC had announced that a run-off election was to be held on November 7, 2009.<sup>301</sup> Karzai responded to the announcement saying it was in the interest of the country to go to a run-off election, a message that his campaign reiterated continuously after October 20, 2009.<sup>302</sup> In the aftermath of Karzai’s acceptance of a run-off, there were discussions about facilitating a power-sharing deal between Karzai and Abdullah to avoid staging another round of elections. The shift in Karzai camp’s rhetoric, from being deeply unreceptive to the run-off, to calling it a matter in the best interest of the country, was likely meant to avoid having to make deals with Abdullah, and rather emerge as a winner of elections.

As it appeared that a run-off election would take place, Abdullah held a press conference issuing a list of demands from the government and stated that, in the event they were not met, he would consider boycotting the run-off.<sup>303</sup> Abdullah wanted the IEC Chief Aziz Ludin fired, accusing him of partiality to Karzai and incompetence.<sup>304</sup> He also called for the suspension of four cabinet-level officials until the end of the elections, including Interior Minister Hanif Atmar, Education Minister Farooq Wardak, Acting Minister of

Border and Tribal Affairs Assadullah Khalid, and Jailani Popal, the director of IDLG.<sup>305</sup> Abdullah also asked for permission to place observers in several key ministries, arguing that official posts and government resources were used for the campaign of Karzai.<sup>306</sup> The IEC chief, Ludin, responded by saying, “I don’t think it is the right of every candidate to ask to be able to appoint and dismiss IEC officials.”<sup>307</sup>

It was highly unlikely that Karzai would have accepted Abdullah’s demands. Accepting these demands would have been a concession by Karzai that his allies were involved in fraud. Abdullah’s November 1 deadline for meeting his demands passed without any serious action, other than the issuance of observer cards for a group of his supporters.<sup>308</sup> On November 1, 2009, Abdullah held an emotional gathering in the Loya Jirga tent and declared that he would not run in the second round because his demands were not met.<sup>309</sup> He mentioned during his speech that in meetings with Karzai he had relented on all but one of his demands—that the IEC chief be fired.<sup>310</sup> Karzai, according to Abdullah, still did not yield.<sup>311</sup> Contrary to fears that he would call on his supporters to boycott polls or take to the street in protest, Abdullah called for calm.<sup>312</sup>

Karzai was left as the only remaining candidate in the race. His campaign spokesperson declared that “[Abdullah’s] withdrawal should not alter the process... the process should go on and the people of Afghanistan should be given the chance to vote.”<sup>313</sup> Yet just a day after Abdullah stepped down, the IEC announced that: “considering the aforementioned reasons and its [IEC’s] given authorities based on Article 156 of the constitution and Article 49 of the Electoral Law, [the IEC] has decided that Mr. Hamid Karzai, the leading presidential candidate of the first round of elections and the only candidate for the runoff, is to be declared as the elected President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.”<sup>314</sup>

Many looked to the reaction of Abdullah’s powerful ally, Atta Mohammed Noor, the governor of Balkh province. During the tense period between the election and Abdullah’s

withdrawal from the race, Governor Noor was one of the most vocal critics of Karzai. A public row between Noor and Karzai's Interior Minister Hanif Atmar had escalated to the point where Noor launched personal attacks on Atmar, calling him a "communist interested in threatening and suppressing people."<sup>315</sup> Noor also warned that Karzai's government would be responsible for any violence that might occur in Balkh province,<sup>316</sup> and he accused Atmar of arming militants and "spreading insecurity" in the province.<sup>317</sup>

Noor initially reacted to the announcement of Karzai's new term in office by demanding roles for Abdullah and his allies in the next government.<sup>318</sup> He later talked about how he was indirectly offered a Cabinet position by Karzai, which he claimed to have rejected.<sup>319</sup> Despite his tough talk, the governor's tone gradually softened. Noor remarked that he "was not against Karzai personally," and he has remained the governor of Balkh, despite his heated opposition to Karzai during the electoral process.<sup>320</sup>

On November 19, 2009, Karzai was inaugurated for a second term. His inauguration ceremony was a largely symbolic event. In his speech, Karzai made public commitments on issues such as security, relations with the United States, and reintegration of militants.<sup>321</sup> He also called on his opponents, including Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani, to join him in the new government.<sup>322</sup> The ceremony was attended by dignitaries from several countries, including the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.<sup>323</sup> After almost a year of heightened political tension, which at many points could have escalated into violence, the 2009 electoral process ended in calm.

## CONCLUSION

President Karzai has evolved into a savvy and sophisticated politician, and has emerged as a stronger player in Afghan politics through the 2009 election. By reaching broad but controversial deals and executing shrewd political maneuvers,

Karzai set himself up for reelection regardless of what happened on election day. He is emboldened by what he achieved during and after the elections. More importantly, Karzai is indebted to those who helped him retain the presidency, and severely distrustful of an administration in Washington he considered bent on his defeat.

In 2009, several power brokers coalesced around the incumbent, yielding him the electoral strength to overpower his opponents. Understanding his deals and the commitments he made to powerful political actors can be illustrative of broader trends in the country. Traditional and emerging political players have invested in Karzai, bringing these hitherto distinct political groupings together. For re-election, Karzai relied on traditionally powerful people such as Ismail Khan and General Dostum, as well as newer figures such as Hanif Atmar and Farooq Wardak and their political networks.

Karzai will now have to pay back his political debts. How and whether Karzai pays back, be it in the form government appointments or other inducements, will likely have a profound impact on policy and on the cohesiveness of the country. Thus it is important to know who was with him during the electoral process, why, and which deals yielded dividend and which ones did not – although he may compensate alliance partners whether they produced desired results or not.

Afghanistan's state institutions are nascent and weak, but politics and political actors are maturing and stronger than ever before. State institutions do not yet have the ability to deliver wherever and whenever they must. Yet, it is not so much that the Afghan state has been losing ground to insurgents since 2001, as commonly understood. More accurately, the insurgents and political actors are fighting to fill political vacuums. And both camps are making notable progress. In the international community, Washington in particular, there is a vocal recognition of the insurgency's progress and strength. But the international community has generally overlooked progress that Karzai and other politicians have made in extending their political networks outward from Kabul. The ac-

cess of politicians to areas beyond Kabul is much greater than recognized. Afghan politicians' reach beyond the capital exists through personal, commercial, family, and political networks, rather than through official institutions that are easily recognizable to the international community.

Applying expansive concepts such as "corruption", "fraud" or "warlords" to explaining current Afghan politics is unhelpful, however. While factors such as corruption are in play, a framework of analysis fixated on it deters from understanding the nuances of the evolving political scene in Afghanistan. The growing marriage of business with politics is central to understanding Afghanistan's traditional and newly rising, ambitious and impactful political personalities. Some of the manifestations of this business-politics relationship will fail tests of transparency or fairness. It is, however, crucial to recognize that the commercial interests of political actors is shaping strategic dynamics. Vice President Fahim's new alliance with Karzai is one major example of this driving dynamic, as the brothers of the political principals have shared business interests. The rise of an ambitious political class in Afghanistan that is equipped, financially and politically, to wield influence as they would like is yet another example. The international community must use clearer lenses, rather than abstractions such as "corruption," to understand the motivations and actions of Afghan political figures.

Failure of some U.S. civilian officials to recognize the evolving political scene in Afghanistan has resulted in Washington's diminishing political capital there. Any future policy towards Afghanistan will have to be informed by recognition of the limits of U.S. influence within the politics of Afghanistan. The gradual loss of influence since 2005 accelerated in spring 2009 when the Obama Administration did not successfully counter the evolving perception among Afghans that Washington sought Hamid Karzai's defeat. The U.S. failed to understand Karzai's growing capability to achieve his own ends with domestic rather than international support.

Risks are inherent in the evolving political order

in Afghanistan, but so are promising opportunities for stabilizing the country. Personalities rather than enduring and credible national institutions dictate the course of politics. Such a political scene lends itself to an often overstated appearance of fragility. Afghanistan's personality-based political order is also inherently fluctuating, and it lacks the stability and endurance that can encourage public confidence. Institutions must develop in order to organize the politics beyond the personalities, and afford it an enduring structure. Development of national political parties can help. So can the parallel development of a state bureaucracy that is sufficiently divorced from political power-players to have its own separate interests, motivations, and professional cadre. Simply reinforcing ministries and projects is not enough. The international community needs to understand the interests, ambitions, and maneuvering capabilities of the key political players. Recognizing the transformed nature of politics in Afghanistan is central not only to creating capable institutions that do more than reinforce the personality politics and human political and commercial networks, but also to increasing the delivery potential and accountability of government.

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