



A Make or Break Moment: Afghanistan Prepares for Key Elections This Fall

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The date of the long overdue parliamentary elections in Afghanistan has been set for 20 October. If they go ahead as planned, the effects of years of international efforts to stabilise the country and build democracy will be visible. An efficient, safe vote will testify to the strength of state institutions and strengthen the legitimacy of the government. On the other hand, the disruption of the elections or undermining the results can cause political chaos and serve the Taliban, seeking to seize power. If requested by the government in Kabul, the U.S., NATO, and the EU should stand ready to support the electoral process, especially in ensuring security.

On 1 April, the Independent Election Commission (IEC) of Afghanistan postponed for the third time the date of general elections to parliament and set a new date of 20 October. About 15 million eligible Afghan voters are to elect 249 deputies to the lower house, the Wolesi Jirga. At the same time, and for the first time in history, democratic elections to district councils will take place. According to the schedule, registration of voters began on 14 April and will last until 12 June. Only then will candidates start to register, followed by a 20-day election campaign. The results will be announced by 15 January 2019, three months before the presidential elections planned for April. However, there is still a risk that the elections will not take place within the prescribed period.

The Importance of the Election. The last parliamentary elections in Afghanistan were held in 2010. The next ones were to take place in 2015 but were postponed in the last three years because of the deteriorating security situation in the country after the withdrawal of ISAF troops in 2014 and prolonged reform of the electoral system. As a result, the parliament operates without a clear democratic mandate and the political agreement on the distribution of power between President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah reached in 2014 has not been formally approved by a change in the constitution. This undermines the legitimacy of the government and the whole democratic system in the country and has led to a constant political crisis. Therefore, there is strong domestic and international pressure to hold the elections this year. It also will be a test of the effectiveness of the government and the state of Afghan democracy, especially crucial ahead of next year's presidential elections.

According to the Afghan authorities, the elections also will be an opportunity to include the Taliban in the political process to end the civil war. That is why in February, at a conference in Kabul, President Ghani presented an offer of peace talks "without preconditions," including the recognition of the Taliban as a political party and an invitation to participate in the elections. The Taliban ultimately rejected the proposal, refusing to talk to a government they describe as an "American puppet," and on 26 April began a new spring offensive. This attitude will make it difficult to conduct a safe and inclusive election.

Challenges and Threats. The most important challenge will be to ensure the security of the voting across as much territory of the country as possible. Responsibility for this lies solely with the Afghan Security Forces

(313,000 soldiers and police). Meanwhile, according to the U.S. Army, in January 2018, the government controlled 56% of the 407 districts in the country, inhabited by 65% of the population. The Taliban effectively control 14% of the districts, with 12% of population, and the rest is contested. According to a BBC investigation, the Taliban operate on 70% of the country's territory, and the situation is further complicated by the significant presence of a local branch of the so-called Islamic State (Islamic State Khorasan Province, or IS-KP). In 2017, the most security incidents since 2002 were reported—23,744. Nevertheless, for the first time since 2012, the number of civilian casualties dropped by 9% compared to the previous year (3,438 killed, or 2% less, with 7,015 injured, a decrease of 11%). This happened despite intensified air attacks from Afghan and American forces on Taliban centres, where civilians were killed accidentally. A suicide attack on 22 April at a voter registration office in which 57 civilians were killed, claimed by IS-KP, confirms that ensuring the security of the elections this time will be more difficult than in previous years. In addition, just the date of the vote will limit some voting because at the end of October in many parts of the country there is already heavy snowfall.

The second basic challenge is the elimination of counterfeit ballots and electoral fraud, which undermined the results of the parliamentary elections in 2010 and the presidential elections in 2014. The quality of the election process is governed by the IEC and the *Electoral Complaints Commission*, which finally has new members in their posts following past, disputed elections. Despite the adoption of a new electoral law in 2016 mandating a system of electronic voting based on biometric voter registration, it cannot be implemented in time. Voting therefore will take place in the traditional way using paper cards. The key is now to recruit and train electoral staff, approve new voter rolls, and prepare the 7,355 polling stations in most of the country. Registration of voters is manual and based on paper identity documents (*tazkera*), which will also be necessary to vote. The problem is that about 10 million Afghans entitled to vote did not have these documents at the beginning of the year and will have to get them by June. Voters will be assigned to a specific polling station to reduce the prevalence of multiple votes. The lack of a central register of voters, personnel problems, and access to premises mean that irregularities cannot be ruled out completely.

The third challenge is to provide an inclusive electoral process, i.e., secure the participation of the major political parties, ethnic groups and factions centred on individual leaders. The possibility of the broad participation of candidates will be crucial for the recognition of the results and an end to the political crisis. Although political parties play a limited role in the Afghan political system (they cannot field lists of their candidates, there are no parliamentary seats reserved for them, etc.), a good result may be important for the main groupings in preparing for the much more important presidential elections. Although the Taliban have already announced a boycott of the elections, the fact that the registration of candidates will only start in the summer gives them time to change their position.

Perspectives and Conclusions. The IEC and the Afghan government are determined to carry out the elections in the announced period despite the many shortcomings. If it can be done relatively safely and credibly, the government will strengthen its position and the electoral system will be confirmed. If attacks cause major disturbances or the results are widely contested, the authorities' legitimacy will be weakened, both in the eyes of the Afghans and their foreign partners. The political chaos that could follow also would make it difficult to hold the presidential elections as planned in 2019. That, in turn, might lead to a reduction of international engagement in Afghanistan. Such a scenario would strengthen the armed opposition, increase the risk of the government's collapse, and the Taliban's seizure of power. Another postponement of the vote and organising it together with the presidential election, which cannot be ruled out at the moment, would confirm the present weakness of the state and encourage further armed resistance. Putting both elections in 2019 could be even more risky and logistically difficult.

The EU and the UN should be ready to provide extra financial and technical support for the electoral process underway. The NATO presence in Afghanistan numbers more than 15,000 troops as part of training mission *Resolute Support*, and they can be used to support Afghan forces in ensuring security during the voting. Poland, with its rich experience in Afghanistan and 250 soldiers in the NATO mission, can expect a request from its allies to increase its presence in the country as needed.

At the same time, the coming months should be used to persuade the Taliban to take part in the elections. An opportunity to revive the peace process could be direct negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban, although the current American administration rejects such a possibility. The growing presence of IS-KP, a common enemy to both the U.S. and the Taliban, could facilitate an agreement, however. At the same time, trust in the U.S. as a credible partner was undermined after its unilateral breach of the nuclear agreement with Iran and this gives an opportunity to China and Pakistan, which have the greatest influence on the Taliban, to play a key role in initiating peace talks. The participation of the Taliban in the elections would be a test of their real popularity and could pave the way for their legal participation in power.