



Nominations for Presidential Elections in Afghanistan – Does it Augur Well?

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The upcoming Presidential Elections in Afghanistan, which are scheduled to be held on April 5, 2014, carry significance for two major reasons. First, the elections would be the first democratic transfer of power in Afghanistan and the most critical one as the international troops would depart by the end of 2014, transferring the security of the nation solely in the hands of the Afghan forces, who not only lack of infrastructure and logistics, but also lack the strategic acumen as well, leaving the apprehension of an unstable future. Second, the elections would be closely watched by the donors, who will see the elections as a key test of progress after 12 years of financial interventions in the form of billions of dollars. The credible elections, as pointed out by Jan Kubis, head of the UN mission in Kabul, would be the "best argument" Afghanistan could make for securing further international support.ⁱ

Though there is an intervening period of around six months in the elections, yet the three-week long registration period, which ended on October 6, 2013, during which the presidential hopefuls filed their candidacies, offers a little insight, not exactly into what would be the future of the elections, but at least into the likely political dynamics that will be shaping Afghanistan. Despite the condition to deposit \$20, 000 as a cash bond along with the signatures of 1, 00, 000 people signifying their support, a total of 27 candidates filed their nominationsⁱⁱ. A hint of the divide among the Afghan society appears to emerge as around 15 out of 27 candidates belong to Pahstun ethnic group, which constitute 42 per cent of the population followed by Tajiks at 27 per cent, with Uzbeks and Hazaras making

up the rest. Graeme Smith of International Crisis Group says that the efforts to cut down the number of candidates have proved futile and the hope of finding the “so-called consensus candidate” has “failed,” which ultimately has disappointed the international community.ⁱⁱⁱ

Apart from such high number of candidates running up for the top post, another concerning issue is the profile of the candidates itself. A look at the profile of some of the big names reveal that the country is going back to the civil war period, as warlords and even close confidants of militant leaders have placed their names for the presidential race. One of the controversial names is of the Afghan parliamentarian Abdul Rasoul Sayyif, who not only is accused of war crimes but is also a man who brought Osama Bin Laden to Afghanistan and is credited to have links with Al-Qaeda.^{iv} Besides, he was the one who, during his tenure in the parliament, called for enacting amnesty to those accused of war crimes. Ismail Khan, a fellow warlord, is his vice-presidential candidate. Another controversial name is of Qutubudin Hikmat, who was once a close ally and confidant of Gulbudin Hikmatyar of Hizb-e-Islami.

General Abdul Rashid Dostum, who has allied with Presidential candidate Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai and is a vice-presidential candidate, is also accused of war crimes and one of the interesting things to note is that during the 2009 elections Ashraf Ghani himself called him a “murderer,” indicating the hard compromises that are being made during the last moments. Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, who otherwise has a clean image in Afghanistan, has his vice-presidential candidates with a tainted image. One of them is Mohammad Khan, who is an official of Hizb-e-Islami party, which continues to remain at odds with the government and the other one is Mohammad Mohaqqiq, leader of Hazaras, who is accused of the war crimes.

Another major issue concerning the elections is that how much fair they would be this time. The past experience does not augur well and the analysts also share the apprehension of fraudulent elections that happened last time which was marred by violence, fraud and delayed results. “And, most wearily, the ever-recurring myopic sense of optimism that this election will somehow be better than the previous ones. It will not,”^v a paper published by the Afghanistan Analysts Network says. Thomas Ruttig, co-

founder and co-director of the Afghanistan Analysts Network said, “The electoral institutions are not independent; there will be ballot stuffing, bulk voting, manipulations in the counting process and other fraud...Those who do this ‘best,’ not those with the most votes cast individually by real people, will have bigger chance to win.”^{vi}

All this brings us back to the point of the close watch international community will be keeping over the elections. With such a scenario building, it seems that there will be a little disenchantment among the donors over the situation in Afghanistan. The recent slashing of aid by Norway,^{vii} citing the reason that the Afghan government is being unable to tame the corruption and improving the women’s rights, could be followed by other countries as well. The nomination process does not seem to augur well for the future of Afghanistan and the moot point remains will Afghanistan be able to make the ‘best argument’ or not.

End Notes

ⁱ “Deadline looms for Afghan Presidential Race,” Aljazeera, October 6, 2013, see <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2013/10/deadline-looms-for-afghan-presidential-race-201310662058808895.html>

ⁱⁱ Ghanizada, “27 Candidates nominated for 2014 Afghan presidential elections,” October 7, 2013. For the list of all 27 candidates along with the name of their nominated vice-presidents see <http://www.khaama.com/27-candidates-nominated-for-2014-afghan-presidential-elections-2436>

ⁱⁱⁱ Rob Crilly, “Warlords and Politicians rush to register for Afghanistan Presidential Elections,” October 6, 2013, see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/10358971/Warlords-and-politicians-rush-to-register-for-Afghanistan-presidential-election.html>

^{iv} “Man who brought al Qaeda to Afghanistan, to now run for country’s president,” October 3, 2013, see <http://tribune.com.pk/story/613055/man-who-brought-al-qaeda-to-afghanistan-to-now-runs-for-countrys-president/>

^v Martine van Biljert, “Repeating Old Warnings: Brace yourselves, the elections are going to be quite a ride,” October 5, 2013, see <http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/repeating-old-warnings-brace-yourselves-the-elections-are-going-to-be-quite-a-ride>

^{vi} Kathy Gilsinan, “Afghan Presidential Race Sees a Fractured Field,” October 7, 2013, see <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/13278/afghan-presidential-race-sees-a-fractured-field>

^{vii} Reuters, “Norway cuts Afghan aid over violence against women, corruption,” October 4, 2013, see <http://news.yahoo.com/norway-cuts-afghan-aid-over-violence-against-women-135214402.html>