

## **Presidential Election in Afghanistan: Democracy in the Making**

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**Abstract:** In accordance with Article 4 of the Bonn Agreement, the presidential election in Afghanistan was held on October 9, 2004. The election was a “real departure” from Afghanistan’s past and ushered in a legitimate constitutional system of governance. Hamid Karzai was elected the President and thus resulted in what can be called the “Pashtun comeback,” not “Pashtun dominance,” to the helm of power. The election, contrary to expectations, was not marred by ethnic, ideological and linguistic cleavages so characteristic of the Afghan society. Karzai’s government will be better advised to facilitate the creation of a “balanced party system” in Afghanistan.

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001 incident, the American-led coalition dismantled the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The military campaign entailed a declared aim to make Afghanistan a democratic society. Election is the core of democracy and democratization process. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of October, 2004, the Afghans of all walks of life went to polling centres to choose their president. This study analyses the first presidential election and its implications for the democratization process in Afghanistan.

### **Background**

During the American military campaign to overthrow the Taliban regime, representatives of various Afghan groups met in Bonn, Germany, to discuss the formation of a post-Taliban administration. Four groups were represented in the Bonn talks: (1) the Peshawar process, representing the Afghans in Peshawar, (2) the Royalists,

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representing the ex-Afghan King Zahir Shah, (3) the Cyprus process representing Afghans wanting peaceful settlement of the conflict, and (4) the Northern Alliance representing the government of Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani.

The Bonn Agreement of December 5, 2001 entrusted the transitional government with the task of promulgating a new constitution and holding elections thereafter.<sup>1</sup> The Afghans named Hamid Karzai as the president of Afghanistan's transitional government with a mandate to transform Afghanistan into a democratic nation. Karzai was officially sworn in as the president of Afghanistan on December 21, 2001.

Article 4 of the Bonn Agreement stipulates that the transitional government should facilitate elections six months after the ratification of the new constitution. The New Constitution promulgated in December 2003 was ratified in January 2004. The presidential election, originally scheduled to be held in July 2004, was finally held on October 9, 2004. Technical problems were the main reason for the postponement of elections.

According to Afghanistan's 2004 Constitution, the president should be elected directly by the people. Electing a political executive through a universal franchise is Afghanistan's first democratic experiment. In the 1960s, King Zahir, in an attempt to transform Afghanistan into a constitutional monarchy, introduced what a native Afghanologist, Amin Saikal, called "Afghanistan's limited experiment with democracy."<sup>2</sup>

According to Saikal, Afghanistan practiced "informal political pluralism." Political parties functioned but they were technically illegal as there were no laws to regulate political parties. Yet, personalities affiliated to the existing informal political groups were elected to the *Wolisi Jirgah*, the Lower House of the Afghan National Assembly or *Loyah Jirgah*. These reforms were halted by a bloodless coup in 1973. Sardar Muhammad Daud declared Afghanistan a republic. But he banned all political groups. Attempts at democratization of Afghanistan were suppressed since then.

The 2004 Constitution promulgated by the Afghan *Loyah Jirgah* declared Afghanistan a republic modeled on the American style of presidential democracy. It provides for the separation of powers

between the executive and legislative branches of government. It prescribes that the political executive hereafter called the president and the members of the National Assembly are to be directly elected by the Afghans. Article 61 of the constitution stipulates that a candidate to be elected the President must receive a majority of more than 50% of the votes cast through free, general, secret and direct voting.

In the event of a failure to receive the required number of votes in the first round, a run-off election has to be held within two weeks of the announcement of the results of the elections. Only two candidates with the highest number of votes can participate in the run-off election and the candidate with the majority shall be elected as the president of Afghanistan. Article 62 of the constitution restricts a president to two terms only. As in the U.S. and other presidential systems, the president combines in his person the functions of head of state and the head of government. As head of government, he appoints the cabinet.

On May 27, 2004, "Laws on Elections" provided in articles 33 and 159, paragraph no.1, of the Constitution were ratified. They provide the modus operandi for the election of the president and the members of the National Assembly. Article 8 of the Laws on Elections provides for the establishment of an Independent Election Commission to conduct elections. Article 16 of the Laws on Elections lays down the constitutional restrictions and stipulation of presidential election. However, Afghanistan has yet to establish an Independent Election Commission. Therefore, the October 2004 presidential election was conducted under the auspices of the United Nations-Afghan Joint Electoral Management Body (JEMB).

Article 61 of the Laws on Elections provides that for the purpose of managing and conducting the first democratic election in Afghanistan, the Transitional Government shall request the assistance of the United Nations (UN). Presidential Decree No. 40 of July 26, 2003 which announced the establishment of JEMB was superseded by Presidential Decree No 110 of February 2004 that gave JEMB "full responsibility for preparing, managing, convening and overseeing the 2004 election" and to assume full powers of the Independent Election Commission until the end of the first election.<sup>3</sup>

## The Candidates

Eighteen candidates contested against the incumbent interim President Hamid Karzai. They represented Afghanistan's major ethnic groups. In an attempt to break the ethnic divide on the Afghan political scene and being conscious of the ethnic structure of Afghan politics, the main contenders picked their vice-presidential running mates from ethnic groups other than their own. The credentials of some of the candidates were dubious. However, they fairly represented the powerful regional and global interests in Afghan politics and society.

The candidates for the presidential election were: (1) Abdul Latif Pedram, a Tajik ethnic journalist and a poet, (2) Hamid Karzai, an ethnic Pashtun and interim president (3) Humayon Shah Asifi, an ethnic Pashtun monarchist, (4) Mir Mohammad Mahfuz Nedahi, an ethnic Tajik who resigned as a Minister of Mines and Industry in the interim government, (5) Mohammad Mohaqeq, a Hazara ethnic and a former minister, (6) Sayed Ishaq Gilani, a Pashtun and a well respected intellectual who fought against the Soviet occupation, (7) Abdul Sattar, an Uzbek, and a university lecturer who served as Minister of Justice under King Zahir Shah in the 1970s, (8) Abdul Hafiz Mansoor, a Tajik and former Northern Alliance General (9) Ghulam Farooq Nejrabi, a Tajik and a paediatric physician, (10) Ahmad Shah Ahmadzai, a Pashtun from the Sadozai clan and leader of the exiled government in Pakistan during the Soviet occupation, (11) Abdul Hasib Arian, an ethnic Tajik and former police colonel (12) Wakil Mangal, a Pashtun and supporter of women's rights, (13) Abdul Hadi Khalilzai, a former teacher and lawyer, (14) Mohammad Abraham Rashid, strong advocate for the rights of Afghan refugees, (15) Mohammad Yunus Qanooni, a Tajik and Education Minister in Karzai's interim government, (16) Sayed Abdul Hadi Dabir, an ethnic Tajik who fought against Soviet occupation, (17) Abdul Rashid Dostum, a former Uzbek ethnic communist, and (18) the only female candidate, Masooda Jalal, a Tajik, a former UN worker and medical doctor.<sup>4</sup> However, the prominent contenders were:

Hamid Karzai, a 46-year-old ethnic Pashtun from southern Afghanistan and internationally popular figure especially after the collapse of the Taliban regime. He is a political science graduate and is believed to have strong US support. Mr Karzai enjoys a

reputation as an independent-minded nationalist with a pro-western bent. An unusual figure in Afghanistan, he served in, yet was highly critical of, an earlier Northern Alliance government, and was wooed by the Taliban but scorned them. He held a high position in President Sibghatullah Mujaddi and Burhanuddin Rabbani's governments after the collapse of the Communist regime in Afghanistan.

Karzai did not agree with most of Rabbani's policies, an act that led to his imprisonment in the mid 1990s before the rise of the Taliban. Later, he moved to America. During the American anti-Taliban military campaign, Karzai went back to Afghanistan to rally a Pashtun rebellion against the Taliban in the south. Karzai, however, was not involved in the factional wars in the 1990s that destroyed Kabul. He chose Ahmed Zia Masood, a Tajik, and Karim Khalili, a Hazara, as his vice-presidential running mates. However, until the nomination day, it was speculated that Karzai would choose Muhammad Qasim Fahim, the Northern Alliance strongman and Defense Minister in Karzai's Interim Administration, as his vice-presidential running mate. Karzai dropped Fahim and chose Zia instead. Zia is the brother of slain Northern Alliance leader, Ahmad Shah Masood. The reason cited for dropping Fahim was that it would create favorable conditions for Karzai's policy of Afghanistan's disarmament. Fahim is alleged to have more than 20,000 militiamen outside the Afghanistan's fragile armed forces. Francesc Vendrell, the European Union's special representative, however, considered Fahim's exclusion important for Karzai to implement his programme with little obstacle and criticism.<sup>5</sup>

Yunus Qanooni, a 47-year-old Tajik who commands substantial support in the Panjshir, belongs to the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. He is a moderate Mujahideen leader who participated in the anti-Soviet military campaign. He acted as Masood's spokesman during the factional wars in the 1990s. He served first as interior minister and then as education minister in transitional government led by Karzai. Qanooni was a key figure representing the Northern Alliance in the Bonn Conference. He was supported by Mohammad Qasim Fahim and Abdullah Abdullah, Defense Minister and Foreign Minister respectively in Karzai's transitional government. His vice-presidential running mates were Taj Mohammed Wardak, a Pashtun, and Sayid Husain Aalimi Balkhi from Hazara ethnic minority group.

Abdul Rashid Dostum, 50, an Uzbek warlord who fought for the Russians before changing sides and joining the Mujahideen. Dostum changed sides frequently. He played a major role in deciding the intensity of the factional wars in Kabul in the 1990s. He served as Deputy Defense Minister in Karzai's transitional government and still commands a private militia near the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif.

### **The Election Campaign**

The campaign for the presidential election formally began on September 7, 2004. The Constitution gave the candidates one month to campaign and mobilize their supporters to vote. The JEMB stipulated that "the political campaign must be based on the principles of freedom of expression and conducted in a climate free of intimidation, which allows for democratic debates and discussion."<sup>6</sup> However, constitutionally no candidate, presidential or otherwise, shall "incite ethnic, linguistic, regional or religious tension and discrimination." According to Manoel de Almeida e Silva, the spokesman for the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), regulations were put in place for free and equal access of the candidates to the state-run media.

Eradication of poverty, warlordism and corruption at all levels of government, reconstruction of infrastructure, women's rights, balanced economy, provision of better living standards, promotion of civil society and above all security were key features of candidates' election manifestos. Candidates attempted to show that they were better nationalists in that each one of them could best represent the multi-ethnic character of the Afghan society. Most of them, however, lacked a vision for Afghanistan and even if they had one, people did not know about it. Most of the candidates were not well known and had no experience in electoral politics. The people also did not know much about their programmes either. The most organised ones were Karzai and Qanooni.

Nevertheless, Karzai unveiled his election manifesto on September 11, 2004. He promised to give top priority to build a "prosperous and dignified Afghanistan" and "strengthen the overall security and government, balanced economic development and accelerate the reconstruction process." He promised to continue the

policy of nation-building he initiated during his provisional administration. The election manifesto also promised to eradicate poverty, provide better standard of living and improve the condition of women through access to higher education and employment opportunities and better working facilities. They will be partners in political, economic and social life based on the constitution. Importantly, Karzai promised that everyone will have equal opportunity to education irrespective of their ethnic and social background. If elected, Karzai would create jobs and ensure Afghanistan's industrialization process, power generation and road-construction. He will strengthen social services and develop science and culture based on the values of Islam and the traditions. He was emphatic about disarming the warlords, facilitating the creation of a civilian public administration, combating drug production and smuggling, and curtail widespread corruption in the public sector.

Yunus Qanooni's election manifesto, entitled "Towards a New United Afghanistan," emphasized institutionalization of civil society and engagement of all factions and groups in the Afghan political scene. Of significance was its emphasis on the role of women in politics. Qanooni maintained that his government would be multi-ethnic and will ensure integration of the diverse ethnic interests in the Afghan body politic. He would transfer some of the powers of the central administration to the provincial governments. He stressed transparency in administration and responsible executive as two fundamental prerequisites of an Islamic polity.

To reduce corruption, he promised a biannual executive progress report to the National Assembly, a fact not highlighted by other candidates. It is to be noted that the establishment of civil society was neglected in Rabbani's Government in which Qanooni was an influential figure. Indeed, the civil war between Rabbani's government and the rest in the mid-1990s was a war against monopolization of political power by one group. Qanooni promised that his government would avoid politicizing issues of public interest in favour of narrow political gains. This election manifesto also vowed that his government's priorities would include the restoration of peace and stability, disarming the militias and combating narcotics and production of opium. At the international level, his government would pursue an independent foreign policy.<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly, the presence of foreign forces was not a key election issue. Though Qanooni's manifesto indirectly makes a passing reference to the presence of foreign forces, the presence of a large number of US and NATO forces was overshadowed by the threats imminent from the Taliban. Security, in fact, is by far the biggest single problem facing the country, largely because the US and its allies, and Mr Karzai's interim government, have failed to eliminate the Taliban threat and disarm the powerful warlords. NATO also failed dismally to meet its own pledges and move its troops in significant numbers to the West and South and help extend the reach of the central government.

The U.S. forces, still fighting alone, will have to do more than hunt Taliban and al-Qaeda remnants on the mountainous border with Pakistan. The presence of foreign forces will certainly be high on the agenda of the candidates who may contest the next presidential election. The Taliban and al-Qaeda must have been highly sophisticated and complex organizations that could not be dismantled three years after the installation of Karzai's interim government. Taliban's inability to attack on the voting day and disrupt the election process may suggest that the threat is receding. However, Zalmay Khalilzad, President Bush's special envoy and US ambassador to Afghanistan, believes that the top priorities of President Karzai's government are reconstruction of Afghanistan, disarming the warlords and achieving an opium free Afghanistan. In all these areas, Karzai needs assistance from the international community, including the US and NATO.

The election manifestos notwithstanding, by and large the candidates could not reach the masses. Most people were not informed about what the candidates stood for. The election campaigns were impaired by a number of interrelated factors: (1) lack of a good campaign strategy, (2) lack of experience and (3) most importantly, lack of security. The candidates did not know how to reach the public. Campaign methods employed were arbitrary. Those who could rally people did not call for big conventions due to security concerns. As a result, large rallies were not held. Supporters could be invited in protected areas and places such as television and radio studios, areas obviously not accessible to all the candidates, despite the JEMB's claim of placing regulations that could ensure equal



access to all candidates to state media.<sup>8</sup> President Karzai, however, was in a better position than his rivals in that he could directly or indirectly influence public opinion through the state-run media and private meetings held in government premises. Some candidates traveled to various parts of the country where they would disseminate their messages through local councils and mosques. Yet, there were large “no go” areas for all of the candidates, due to security concerns.

### **Voter Turnout**

According to JEMB, over 10.5 million (10,567,834) eligible voters had registered, including 4.3 million (4,359,651) women. In the neighbouring Pakistan, an approximate total of 740,000 voters registered of whom 27 percent were female.<sup>9</sup> An estimated 8.2 million ballots were cast in the historic vote on October 9, 2004 thus giving a voter turnout of over 80 per cent. However, the *EurasiaNet* on October 21, 2004 reported that “overall, election officials estimate the turnout at about 66 percent of the 10-plus million registered voters.”<sup>10</sup>

The high turnout in many places immediately led to unsubstantiated suspicions that some Afghans were honouring the old political adage of “voting early and voting often.” In the early hours of the election day, the 15 candidates, challenging President Karzai, alleged widespread fraud and claimed that there had been multiple voting on a massive scale. They threatened to boycott the vote and requested the JEMB to close the voting centres. However, international observers did not uphold the contenders’ accusations. The JEMB formed an investigation team of “Panel of Impartial Electoral Experts” (PIEE) to investigate the electoral irregularity claims. PIEE would have been more credible had it included an Afghan as a member of the investigation panel. The foreigners assisting the conduct of election were mainly blamed for the irregularities.

The JEMB took the issue of complaints seriously. It did not announce the election results and the winner until the investigation into the allegation was completed. The prompt decision by the JEMB to investigate the alleged election fraud was well received and bestowed legitimacy to President Karzai’s administration. The PIEE visited polling centers where disputed ballots were quarantined, met

local and international election observers and the candidates before it drew its conclusion and submitted its final report to JEMB.<sup>11</sup> Agence France-Presse news agency on November 3, 2004 reported that according to the PIEE 38-page report submitted to JEMB, the UN-appointed panel of experts found that “shortcomings” on election day, including the failure and mix-up of indelible ink meant to stain voters’ fingers to prevent multiple voting, did not impact the ballot’s outcome. The report stated that “there were shortcomings ... but they could not have materially affected the overall result.”<sup>12</sup> The report said though “it had found attempts to rig the vote on October 9, 2004 including ballot stuffing, but the irregularities had not affected the outcome.”<sup>13</sup>

The European Union and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe had sent some 125 monitors. They were, however, confined to Kabul for fear of Taliban attacks. In the countryside, the Free and Fair Elections Foundation of Afghanistan through its 2,300 observers monitored the voting process. The observers believed that overall, a fairly democratic environment had prevailed in the polling centres. To Human Rights Watch, “Afghans put in an amazing performance, in spite of the insecurity that still plagues the country, and the international community has to account for its disappointing performance.”<sup>14</sup>

The contenders’ allegations made the outcome look controversial, despite its verification by the international observers. The nascent democratic process in Afghanistan for obvious reasons might not be perfect, judged by the standards of advanced democracies, it nevertheless was commendable. The complaints filed with the JEMB could not be substantiated. The nature of unsubstantiated allegations suggests that they lacked coherence. The controversy was resolved when the contenders retracted and accepted the results. On October 20, 2004, Manoel de Almeida e Silva, head of United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, in a press briefing in Kabul described the nature of complaints as follows:

... most of the 285 complaints, that is, 45.3% are about the indelible ink. Some 13% are about the process in general and in that group they are sometimes not clearly described. 8.4% of the complaints are about polling personnel and 8.07% percent are compliments to the JEMB and to the electoral process itself.

Only 5% of complaints were about multiple voting or under-aged voters.<sup>15</sup>

## The Results

The JEMB on November 3, 2004 formally declared Hamid Karzai as the winner of Afghanistan's landmark presidential election. The main contenders, including Qanooni, conceded defeat. President Karzai received 55.4 per cent, Qanooni 16.3 per cent, Mohaqeq, 11.7 per cent, Dustam 10 per cent, and the other 12 candidates shared the remaining 7 per cent of the ballots cast.<sup>16</sup> JEBM chairman, Zakim Shah said that President Karzai received 4,443,029 legally counted votes out of a total of 8,128,940. President Karzai had a decisive 39.1 percentage point lead over his nearest rival, Qanooni who received 1,306,503 votes. Muhaqeq polled 935,325 votes and Dustam polled 804,861 votes. Only four candidates polled more than ten percent of votes (see Table 1).

While receiving resounding victory in the south, southeast, northeast, and western zones of the country, zones identified to be mainly dominated by the Pashtun ethnic majority, Karzai seems to have performed fairly well in the north and central Afghanistan zones identified to be dominated by the Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, and other minorities. In some parts of non-Pashtun zones, Karzai performed extremely well.<sup>17</sup> According to one survey, President Karzai received support from 86 per cent of Pashtun voters. This was not surprising as Karzai belongs to this ethnic group, which is the largest in Afghanistan. But, unexpectedly, 40 per cent of Tajiks also voted for Karzai. Additionally, Karzai received the support of 16 per cent of Uzbek and 21 per cent of Hazara voters. A break down of results by ethnic zones show that in zones with dominant non-Pashtun minorities, Karzai received 29 per cent in Balkh, 45 per cent in Kunduz, 74 per cent in Samangan, 23 per cent in Takhar (provinces in northern zone), 25 per cent in Parwan, 37 per cent in Kapisa, 53 per cent in Kabul (province in central Afghanistan), and 57.8 per cent in Herat (a province in the western zone). Michael Nyilis notes:

... anecdotal evidence suggests that Afghans voted across ethnic lines to a surprising degree, with many Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazara voting for the transitional president, Hamid

Karzai, a Pashtun. Afghanistan is still an overwhelmingly rural country, where ethnic and tribal loyalties are strong. Even so, most Afghans appeared to have cast their votes for the person they thought was best for Afghanistan, even if he belonged to a rival ethnic group.<sup>18</sup>

Karzai also received a majority support from the Afghans residing in Iran and Pakistan. Karzai polled 80 per cent of votes cast in Pakistan and 44.4 per cent of votes cast in Iran. It is to be noted that the majority of the Afghans residing in Iran are predominantly non-Pashtun.

**Table 1: 2004 Presidential Election Results**

Valid Votes: 8,024,536 Invalid Votes: 104,404  
Total Votes: 8,128,940

Candidate	Affiliation	Votes Polled	% Votes
Hamid Karzai	Independent	4,443,029	55.4
Yunus Qanooni	Hezbe-Nuhzat e Mili	1,306,503	16.3
H M Mohaqiq	Independent	935,325	11.7
A Rashid Dostum	Independent	804,861	10.0
A Latif Pidram	Hezbe-Cangara e Mili	110,160	1.4
Masooda Jalal	Independent	91,415	1.1
Syed Ishaq Gilani	Nuhzate Hambastage Mili	80,081	1.0
Ghulam Farooq N	Hezbe-Istiqlal	24,232	0.3
10 candidates*	Independent	228,930	2.8

Note: \*The ten independent candidates were: Ahmad Shah Ahmadzai, Abdul Sattar Sirat, Hamayon Sha Asifi, Abdul Hadi Dabir, Abdul Hafiz Mansoor, Abdul Hadi Khalilzai, Mir Mohammad Mahfooz Nidahi, Mohammad Ebrahim Rashid, Wakil Mangle and Abdul Haseeb Aryan

Source: The Joint Election Management Body, "2004 Afghan Election Project: Afghanistan's Presidential Election Results" [Online] available from <http://www.electionsafghanistan.org.af/Election%20Results%20Website/index.htm>, accessed April, 21, 2005.

Therefore, it is premature to argue, as Pepe Escobar does, that the October presidential election will widen ethnic, ideological and linguistic cleavages of Afghan society. Escobar says: "in the real

world, what will happen is that Dostum gets the Uzbek vote, Mohaqeq the Hazara vote and Qanooni the Tajik vote. Karzai will be their hostage.”<sup>19</sup> The voting pattern, however, did not show any widening of the ethnic divide. Therefore, the October election and the pattern of voting across ethnic lines was not only a victory for democracy, it was equally a defeat for those Afghanologists and Afghan intellectuals who often cited the theory of “ethnic divide” as the major factor in the Afghan crisis. The voters unanimously send a powerful signal that one may defer to other causes of the problems facing Afghanistan.

### **The Karzai Factor**

The election is a “real departure” from Afghanistan’s past and a “great leap forward.” This election is significant for its rejection of despotism in all its forms and for conferring legitimacy on a new government to be headed by Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun. This suggests what can be called the “Pashtun comeback” not “Pashtun dominance” to the helm of power and Afghan politics. One, however, has to distinguish between the traditional Pashtun-dominated regimes and President Karzai’s government.

As stated earlier, the constitution stipulates that the presidential candidates among others shall not “incite ethnic, linguistic, regional or religious tension and discrimination.”<sup>20</sup> It also guarantees the rights of all ethnic groups in Afghanistan. Thus, a Pashtun may lead the country; however, he is required to discard ethnic imbalances on the Afghan political scene. Karzai swept the ballot in provinces dominated by the majority Pashtun group, the traditional rulers of the rugged, isolated country, and he also fared well in areas where ethnic minorities hold sway. Karzai chose Ahmad Zia, a member of the Tajik minority ethnic group, and Khalili, a Hazara, as his running mates. Judging by the diverse ethnicity of the presidential candidates and their running mates, the voters had indeed crossed the ethnic lines.

Evidently, the ethnic origin of President Karzai does not fully explain his success in the October election. Though the American protective umbrella and the presence of Karzai’s American bodyguards had eroded much of the credibility he enjoyed in the initial days of his assumption of power as the interim president of

Afghanistan, he was still viewed as the most credible candidate. Most of the prominent candidates suffered from what can be called a “mistrust syndrome” among Afghans. They failed, while in power, to explain to the people that the policies and approaches they had adopted were indeed aimed to protect Afghanistan’s national interests.

Karzai did not belong to political groups or factions that fought the civil war. Being nonpartisan to factional fighting, Karzai enjoyed the people’s trust. Furthermore, Karzai’s rivals lacked a vision and public support. Most of them were not popular figures. Some, while in power, were incapable of integrating the diverse interests of the Afghan society and failed to honour the Afghan identity. At best, they were seen to be the protectors of the narrow interests to which they belonged.

Karzai, possessing none of the negative features others had, showed leadership and sagacity. People voted for Karzai hoping that he would be able to revive the Afghan identity and its status in international politics. Most of the “enlightened Afghans” believe that his international reputation will enable him to place Afghanistan on the road to a progressive and developed nation that is both peaceful and stable. *Eslahat*, one weekly news source, wrote that:

people [Afghans] noticed that the international community, especially the United States, supports Hamid Karzai. They thought that if anyone else is elected, then the international community would stop helping Afghanistan, and the country would fall back into the state that existed three years ago [under Taliban rule].<sup>21</sup>

Thus, Afghans voted for political stability under Karzai. They voted in the belief that Karzai will be able to develop Afghanistan, create jobs and reduce poverty as he enjoys international recognition and could garner support from the international community.

## Conclusion

The October presidential election was part of the Bonn Agreement. A total of 18 candidates contested the election including one woman. The contest took place largely among four candidates. Hamid Karzai, the President in transitional government, was declared a clear winner. This was the first democratic experiment in Afghanistan. It signalled

the end of the despotic era and conferred legitimacy to the presidency of Hamid Karzai.

The election result can be interpreted to mean a “Pushtun comeback” in the sense that the newly-elected president is a Pashtun. However, elections were not marred by ethnic or sectarian cleavages, and the winner, a Pashtun, secured the support of all ethnic groups in the country. Furthermore, the newly-elected president does not have the freedom to do as he likes. The 2004 Constitution provides for a fair system of checks and balances. It specifically prohibits sectarianism or ethnicity of any kind. In other words, the new President has to balance various interests to ensure political stability and economic development of Afghanistan.

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## Notes

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