Kristina Keenan
Contemporary Art and Geopolitics in the Arab World
Final Research Paper

9 April 2014

**Democracy in Afghanistan: Can We Expect a Peaceful Transition of Power?
Artwork Title: *Jihad Gangster - Afghan Parliamentary Campaign*
Artist: Aman Mojadidi**

On April 5, 2014, presidential elections were held in Afghanistan. Since current President Hamid Karzai served the maximum two terms in office and cannot run again, the elections will result in the first democratic transfer of power since the U.S.-led intervention in the country. Can we expect a peaceful transition? Are the Afghan people embracing democracy? These questions will be addressed in this paper, along with a look at the role of youth in Afghanistan’s future, the politics of opinion polls, and issues of corruption. To add to this analysis, I will also look at the artwork by Afghan-American artist Aman Mojadidi, specifically focusing on his piece entitled, *Jihadi Gangster: Afghan Parliamentary Campaign*.

 **AFGHAN ELECTIONS**

The conditions in Afghanistan are difficult and unique. The country is heavily dependent on foreign aid, has an estimated 35 percent unemployment rate, and is the world’s biggest opium producer. Insurgent groups continue to operate in the countryside and there is widespread corruption.[[1]](#footnote-1)

*The Campaign and Opinion Polls*

A new phenomenon in Afghanistan during the run-up to the 2014 presidential elections, was polling. Three organizations conducted opinion polls in December 2013 in order to have an idea of which candidates were the front runners. The organizations included the American *Democracy International* and *Glevum Associates*, in addition to *TOLO News*, Afghan’s first 24-hour news station. All three found Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai to be the most popular candidates.[[2]](#footnote-2)

*Democracy International* asked the question: “What’s the single most important issue the president should focus on?” Top results included: corruption, economy, security. Other issues included: reconciliation with the Taliban, roads, defeating Taliban, education, and medical care.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Following the December polls, questions about American influence in the election process started to arise. A spokesperson of the United States Embassy in Kabul denied that the U.S. was acting politically. He explained that the poll was organized “to help promote inclusive, credible, and transparent elections in Afghanistan”. As the New York Times reports, American officials claimed that the U.S. had funded the polls simply because Afghan institutions did not have the resources to conduct polling themselves.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Additionally, in late January, *Reuters* reported that the U.S. government had canceled its funding for *Democracy International* to continue organizing opinion polls in Afghanistan. This was later confirmed by the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. An embassy spokesman explained, "Statements by some electoral authorities and candidates' camps suggested that there was ... a perception that the polling results were somehow biased," he said. "In order to avoid any perception - however baseless - of U.S. interference, we have decided to forgo additional U.S.-funded polling regarding the upcoming election."[[5]](#footnote-5)

*The Youth Vote*

Analysts found that while youth in Afghanistan seemed more enthusiastic to vote in this election compared to the 2009 election, there was no clear way to predict which way they might vote. In a country where nearly two-thirds of the population is under the age of 25, the youth represent a significant voter base. Older voters who were interviewed said they were mostly focused on issues of stability and security, while many youth claimed to be mostly focused on the economy and education. *Al Jazeera* interviewed several Afghan students in Kabul, including Ghowsuddin, 18, who said, "The economy is important for young people. It's the most important. Our leaders need to know that young people can work with their own hands, that we can improve our own level, that we can improve the future".[[6]](#footnote-6)

But most students could not explain why they preferred their candidate and disliked the others. Only Nazir Rassouli, 20, could explain. He said, "One thing that is important to understand is that these men are very good, but from among them, many were jihadi leaders in Afghanistan. This means they have had a hand in the fighting in Afghanistan, and I will not vote for them."[[7]](#footnote-7)

Martine van Bijlert, a founder of the *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, an independent non-profit policy research organization[[8]](#footnote-8), also found youth voter opinions to be quite diverse. She said, “Young Afghans are a large group and are varied in their outlook, depending on where they come from and where they live. … They may vote very differently from their parents, or they may not. And because the youth population is fragmented, it makes it harder to predict how the vote will go."[[9]](#footnote-9)

*The Candidates*

**Abdul Rassoul Sayyaf** is an ethnic Pashtun, hardline Islamist, former jihadi warlord, and influential religious scholar. He has been linked to well-known terrorists, including Osama Bin Laden, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (architect of the 9/11 attacks), and 1993 World Trade Center bomber, Ramzi Yousef.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**Gul Agha Sherzai** is a former jihadi warlord and former governor of both Kandahar and Nangahar provinces. Known in recent years for his efforts in reconstruction, Sherzai is an important ally to President Karzai and served as one of his special advisers. Sherzai has been accused of involvement in opium trafficking during his time as governor of Kandahar (at the time of the mujahedeen government), though he denies these accusations.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**Dr. Ashraf Ghani** **Ahmadzai**, often referred to simply as “Ghani”, is a Western-educated ethnic Pashtun with degrees from the American University in Beirut and Columbia University. During the 1990s, he worked as an adviser for the World Bank and returned to Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban to serve as a special adviser to the U.N. secretary general’s envoy. He became a finance minister during the Karzai administration. Ghani explained that his selection of vice presidential running mate, ex-warlord General Dostum, was "a realistic balance between forces that have been produced in the last 30 years and have a base in this society." [[12]](#footnote-12)

**General Rashid Dostum** is a controversial ex-warlord, “legendary and widely feared” according to *NBC News*, who ran for vice president alongside presidential candidate Dr. Ashraf Ghani. An ethnic Uzbek, Dostum is an aggressive battlefield commander who helped the U.S. bring down the Taliban in late 2001.[[13]](#footnote-13)

**Dr. Abdullah Abdullah** is a former ophthalmologist who ran against President Karzai in 2009. An ethnic Tajik, he represents a strong voice of the opposition. During the 1980s, he served as a high-level adviser to the late jihadist Ahmad Shah Masood, who fought against the Soviets. After the collapse of the Taliban regime, Abdullah spent four years as Afghanistan’s minister of foreign affairs. During the 2014 election campaign, two of his campaign staff members were shot dead outside their office in Herat.[[14]](#footnote-14)

**Dr. Zalmai Rassoul** is a former foreign minister, an ethnic Pashtun, and is very close to President Karzai. He spent seven years as a national security adviser and was educated at the Franco-American school in Kabul, *Lycee Istiqal*, and the Paris Medical School in France.[[15]](#footnote-15)

*Election Day*

Hailed as a success, no major violence was reported on the day of elections, Saturday, April 5th, and approximately 60 percent of eligible Afghan voters cast their ballots. However, *Reuters* reported two Afghan election workers were killed by a roadside bomb in Kunduz province on Sunday, April 6th along with the ballots they were transporting.[[16]](#footnote-16)

*Battling corruption*

During the 2009 presidential election, Afghanistan’s Independent Election Complaints Commission recorded 2,842 complaints of voting violations, including reports of ballot-box stuffing, leading to a recount of votes and low public opinion of the accuracy of the outcome. The commission, which had included significant international influence in 2009, was completely controlled this time by Afghans this election. Nader Mohseni, spokesman for the election commission, commented on the situation this year. “The scale of fraud and violations in this election was much lower compared to previous elections,” he said. Citizens had a period of two days to file complaints, in which 1,573 were recorded by the commission. “Compared with 7.5 million people who voted,” said Mr. Mohseni, “that number is very small”. Official results of the presidential election are expected by April 24th.[[17]](#footnote-17)

**AMAN MOJADIDI**

*Biography*

Aman Mojadidi is an American artist of Afghan descent who was born in Jacksonville, Florida in 1971. He has both bachelors and masters degrees in Cultural Anthropology and he has been exhibiting his artwork around the world for the last ten years.[[18]](#footnote-18) His artwork includes photography, audio, video, story-telling, and various sight/context specific installations.

Speaking at the TEDGlobal conference in Edinburgh in June 2012, Aman refers to himself as "Afghan by blood, redneck by the grace of God." He explains his typical American childhood and how it was intertwined with home-cooked Afghan food and infused with knowledge that there was a war in his family’s country of origin.

Aman’s artwork often focuses on what he calls the “geography of self”, referring to how one is positioned in the world, “not just physically, but emotionally, mentally and, perhaps even for those who believe, spiritually.” *Our Memories Are Not Related*, for example, illustrates the contradiction of growing up with two cultural identities through pairing an audio recording from the beaches and environments of Jacksonville, Florida with images of the ruins of a family fort in Alghouey, Afghanistan.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Another theme in Aman’s artwork is challenging historical narratives. In *What Histories Lay Beneath Our Feet?* Aman mixes fact with fiction by writing his family history through the imaginary character Zaman Mojadidi, symbolizing one of his ancestors who migrated from Afghanistan to India centuries ago. The character Zaman has a non-traditional belief system which is unacceptable in his homeland, but then embraced in his new community in Ft. Kochi, Kerala. As the story goes, Zaman remained in India for the majority of his days, living peacefully, until the arrival of the British who destroyed his home and put him in prison. Aman’s story is accompanied by an excavation site he created which shows the destroyed home of his fictional forefather. In an interview by *OPEN Magazine*, Aman explains that “this archeological site is created for illustrating the story of my ancestors that challenges the orthodoxy of religion. The Afghan ministry of culture acknowledges and focuses only on Islam, though there is an intermixing of cultures. It is a pluralistic society: there are Sikhs in Kabul, there are also Jews.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

*The Jihadi Gangster*

In his installation entitled, *Conflict Bling (2009)*, Aman has created wearable fake gold necklaces and prosthetic legs. They are symbols of how he feels that jihadis in Afghanistan often wear their jihad the way a Western “gangster” might wear bling jewelry to indicate wealth (political, economic, material, or personal).[[21]](#footnote-21)

Through the *Conflict Bling* installation, the artist builds upon the character which emerged in which he continues exploring the “the idea of globalized gangster styles and iconography,” he says. He calls this character the *Jihadi Gangster* and in 2010, Aman produced a series of photographs where he dressed up as this character and sported the same conflict bling in a series called, *A Day in the Life of a Jihadi Gangster*. He explains that through these images, he was able to further explore his “dual cultural heritage as an American-born Afghan with strong familial ties to politics in Afghanistan, including jihad.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

In 2011, Aman created an installation called *Conflict Chic,* where he continues his exploration into the “glamorization of conflict and conflict zone lifestyles through fashion concepts for the soldier and the insurgent”. His creations include a bullet-proof vest adorned with afghan fox fur and traditional afghan vests transformed into suicide vests, complete with multiple pockets to hold explosives.[[23]](#footnote-23)

*The Jihadi Gangster Runs for Parliament*

The culmination of Aman’s *Jihadi Gangster* is a fake campaign poster for his run for Parliament in Afghanistan, entitled, *Jihadi Gangster Afghan Parliamentary Campaign*. The poster includes Aman, dressed as the gangster of his previous works, wearing a suit, a traditional head piece, and a gold chain with a gold pistol hanging from it (a piece from his *Conflict Bling* installation). The slogan at the top of the poster reads: "Vote for Me! I did Jihad and I'm rich". Covering the face of the candidate is the text: "Your favorite Jihadi Face Here". The text just to the right of the candidate represents the province the candidate represents: "Independent candidate, wolesi jirga, all provinces".

During an interview I conducted with the artist, he explained that actual campaign posters in Afghanistan often have a background with symbols in the Afghan colors of red, black, and green. He chose dollar signs and rifles as the symbols to represent the Jihadi Gangster. The first box on the right represents the election symbol, which Aman chose to be three diamonds. Below it, the election number given is zero, zero, zero. Both election symbols and numbers are associated with candidates in order to make voting easier. Aman's choice of voting number was a play on voting "no confidence". Lastly, at the bottom of the poster Aman has signed his full name, though it is written backwards.

*How and why did the artist create the piece?*

During my interview with Aman, I asked what inspired him to create the character of the Jihadi Gangster. "One thing that I've noticed living in Afghanistan is the pride people take in having done jihad. They use this fact in order to make claims to positions in government. It's as if they wear their jihad like gangster bling."

The printing of the posters, as the artist described, was a little tricky. "No printer was willing to print them for me. They were all afraid of being caught with the posters,” he said. After going around to a few places, including print shops of friends, Aman finally found a place that was willing to print 50 copies. "It was much less that what I had wanted," he said, "but I could only get that many printed."

The installation of the posters included the artist actually putting up them around Kabul, at night, during the run-up of the 2010 Parliamentary elections. Aman brought with him one person to film him putting up the posters, one person to take photos, one person to drive, the posters, and a big bucket of glue. After putting up all of the posters, Aman threw a way the glue bucket and he and his team drove off. During their drive, they were stopped at a check point where the police officer asked them about the posters. Apparently, someone had reported to the police that some guys, driving a similar truck, were going around putting up posters (one of which the person had pulled down and given to the police). "I was covered in glue”, Aman laughed. "We couldn't have looked more guilty." But the police did not find any copies of the posters in the vehicle, so they were allowed to pass the check point.

It turned out that actually a few complaints had been made about Aman's fake campaign posters to the Complaints department of the national Independent Election Commission, which started investigating who was behind them. Aman said that he had already planned to leave Afghanistan a few days later due to an exhibition he was having in Dubai. Once the elections had passed, the Commission was so busy with massive amount of reports of election fraud, that Aman's poster stunt appeared to be low on their list of priorities.

**THE ARTIST AND THE AFGHAN ELECTIONS**

Aman's photographs from his *A Day in the Life of a Jihadi Gangster* series are his most popular pieces and they often get a laugh out of people. But his explanation of the attitude of the Afghan jihadi turned politician, was quite interesting. "There were a few people who saw me putting up the campaign posters and they thanked me. But I saw a few days later, that most of them had been torn down or covered up."

We discussed a little about the Afghan presidential elections which had just passed less than a week before the interview. When asked if the Afghan people were embracing democracy, he responded, "People are suspicious of elections and they are expecting fraud. Some weren't going to vote because they didn’t think it would make an impact." He continued, "Elections are quite foreign in Afghanistan. Perhaps a modified version of the *jirga[[24]](#footnote-24)* could have been adopted. Even Karzai had used a *jirga* during his presidency in parallel to the Parliament. It was confusing to the people in terms of who had final decision-making authority. Some even still ask, 'Who do you think will be the new King?' They are more used to a king, than a president so although people are becoming accustomed to the ‘new democracy’ it will still take time before it’s fully internalized."

Aman Mojadidi's *Jihadi Ganster*, faux election poster, and observations from living in Afghanistan shed light on the current sentiments surrounding the democratic election process in Afghanistan. Many of the presidential candidates are ex-jihadi. It will not be until the end of April 2014 before the world knows who the Afghan people have selected as their next president, and even longer if the election results lead to a run-off, but so far the process has been relatively peaceful, with fewer reports of voting fraud. As Aman put it, "The next president will come in with a new agenda which will bring some kind of change. And I think any change will be good for the country moving forward."

**Executive Summary**

**ABOUT THE ARTWORK**

Created by Afghan-American artist Aman Mojadidi, *Jihadi Gangster: Afghan Parliamentary Campaign,* features a character which he had previously created and used in his mise-en-scene photographic works called the *A Day in the Life of a Jihadi Ganster*. The faux campaign poster illustrates the character’s run for Parliament in Afghanistan. It includes the artist dressed wearing a suit, a traditional head piece, and a gold chain with a gold pistol hanging from it (a piece from his *Conflict Bling* installation). The slogan at the top of the poster reads: "Vote for Me! I did Jihad and I'm Rich". Covering the face of the candidate is the text: "Your Favorite Jihadi Face Here". The text just to the right of the candidate represents the province the candidate represents: "Independent candidate, wolesi jirga, all provinces".

For the background, Aman chose dollar signs and rifles in the Afghan colors of red, black, and green, as the symbols to represent the candidate. The first box on the right represents the election symbol, which Aman chose to be three diamonds. Below it, the election number given is zero, zero, zero. Both election symbols and numbers are associated with candidates in order to make voting easier. Aman's choice of voting number was a play on voting "no confidence". Lastly, at the bottom of the poster Aman has signed his full name, though it is written backwards.

**HOW AND WHY DID THE ARTIST CREATE THE PIECE?**

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The installation of the posters included the artist actually putting them up around Kabul, at night, during the run-up of the 2010 Parliamentary elections. Afterwards, he was stopped at a police check-point. Apparently, someone had reported to the police that some guys, driving a similar truck, were going around putting up posters (one of which the person had pulled down and given to the police). "I was covered in glue”, Aman laughed. "We couldn't have looked more guilty." But the police did not find any copies of the posters in the vehicle, so they were allowed to pass the check point. It turned out that actually a few complaints had been made about Aman's fake campaign posters to the Complaints department of the national Independent Election Commission.

**IMPACT OF THE ARTWORK AND FEEDBACK FROM THE ARTIST**

When asked about the current presidential elections in Afghanistan and whether he thought people were embracing democracy, Aman responded, "People are suspicious of elections and they are expecting fraud. Some weren't going to vote because they didn’t think it would make an impact." He continued, "Elections are quite foreign in Afghanistan. Perhaps a modified version of the *jirga[[25]](#footnote-25)* could have been adopted. Even Karzai had used a *jirga* during his presidency in parallel to the Parliament. It was confusing to the people in terms of who had final decision-making authority. Some even still ask, 'Who do you think will be the new King?' They are more used to a king, than a president so although people are becoming accustomed to the ‘new democracy’ it will still take time before it’s fully internalized."

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Shortened:

Created by Afghan-American artist Aman Mojadidi, *Jihadi Gangster: Afghan Parliamentary Campaign,* features a faux campaign poster with the slogan: "Vote for Me! I did Jihad and I'm Rich". Covering the face of the candidate is the text: "Your Favorite Jihadi Face Here".

"One thing that I've noticed living in Afghanistan is the pride people take in having done jihad,” says Mojadidi. “They use this fact in order to make claims to positions in government. It's as if they wear their jihad like gangster bling."

The election candidate, the *Jihadi Gangster*, was previously created by the artist and used in his mise-en-scene photographic works called the *A Day in the Life of a Jihadi Ganster*, where the character can be seen wearing “bling” like the gold chain with pistol, as in the poster. The installation of the posters included the artist actually putting them up around Kabul, at night, during the run-up of the 2010 Parliamentary elections.

Afghans are now waiting for the results of the current presidential elections which took place on April 5th. Most of the candidates are ex-jihadi.

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