

Main points about the elections - A civil society perspective

Robert Kluyver, 10 October 2004

These views stem from the following perspectives:

- ❖ Spending elections day together with FEFA, the Free and Fair Elections Foundation for Afghanistan, a group of domestic observers, and going to their meetings;
- ❖ Exchanges with national and international journalists, press conferences, news reports etc.
- ❖ Discussions with other foreign Afghanistan experts
- ❖ The Afghan media and analysis by Afghan colleagues and friends

Main Points

1. Success for the Afghan people and failure for the Afghan government and the international community
 - a. Most problems can be attributed to JEMB's faulty organization and training
 - i. staff not properly recruited: bias was often reported, for different candidates in different places. A lot of Qanuni supporters seem to have been recruited, including in Jalalabad, Kandahar and Herat. Others were reportedly biased towards Karzai (Gardez) Massouda Jalal (Badakhshan, Herat), and Mohaqqeq (Kabul)
 - ii. staff not properly trained: unaware of the procedures, the agents of political candidates and domestic observers intervened in many cases to "explain" the rules and regulations, or take over some of JEMB staff duties
 - iii. the ink. JEMB had two kinds of ink for the fingerprints, and an ill-conceived (and non-understood) system to apply it. One of these systems was through refillable markers, which confused polling staff mixed with the markers for the ballots. This actually might not have been a problem (if multiple voting didn't result) but was jumped upon opportunistically by opposition candidates to justify the call for a boycott.
 - iv. other logistical problems: frequent cases of lack of ballot boxes, ballot papers, lack of supplies in the morning, communications difficulties (satphones available but lack of knowledge how to use them), no provisions to safeguard or transport the ballot boxes after closure of the polling centers...
 - v. Security staff (the national police) was not trained and in many cases broke the rules - although interference was not frequently reported.
 - vi. There was an excess of candidate agents, especially of Qanuni, in many polling centers, resented as interference by many voters. This was not sufficiently regulated by JEMB
 - b. Intimidation levels (the use or the threat of violence) were reportedly *very* low
 - c. *No* security problems except very minor ones: not one violent death reported!
 - d. Despite the ease to vote several times (washable ink and widespread multiple registration) no cases have been reported so far, except by what seem to be "agents provocateurs" of some opposition candidates in Kabul (before foreign media)
 - e. The Afghan people participated massively and freely in the elections and proved once again their capacity to participate in political processes, and their cohesion in wanting peace and a regulated solution to political problems.

2. The opposition candidates discredited themselves with the call for a boycott. The whole political class that is being formed now - political parties and their candidates - seems forced, ineffectual and incapable of representing the Afghan population. Of the opposition candidates,
 - a. Qanuni will have the highest score, but this he obtained with “dirty” politics: his supporters interfering with the vote, possibly multiple voting, intensive campaigning before and during elections. His methods remind Afghans of mid-90s politics (but of the better kind).
 - b. Mohaqqeq possibly was the most professional candidate, partially due to training of his electoral team in Iran. His past and that of Dostum are however not ignored by voters.
 - c. Dostum will also get a fair share of the vote because he still is a “local hero” among Uzbeks and his supporters did not need to resort to pressurizing voters
 - d. Massuda Jalal proved she has no appeal to Afghan women
 - e. Sattar Sirat, “the experienced statesman”, made an effort to catch the religious vote and to lead the opposition, but struck a ridiculous figure generally
 - f. Latif Pedram during his campaign had acquired a reputation among a small group of voters: young Tajik nationalist liberal intellectuals; but discredited himself by calling the elections day “a black day for Afghanistan” and denouncing a “take-over by US forces” which, as all Afghans know, has happened a few years ago, and which they generally don’t resent.
 - g. Ishaq Gailani will enjoy a small percentage of traditional vote but struck everybody as the most static politician - and he joined Karzai a few days before the elections
 - h. Aryan, Asefi, Dabir, Khalilzai, Nejrabi, Nedai, Wakil Mangal, Rashid, Hafiz Mansoor and (probably) Ahmadzai all proved to be insignificant candidates

Counterpoint: one can say that this was a great learning experience and that the candidates for the parliamentary elections may use these experiences to increase their political “wisdom”

3. Civil society emerged, in the final stages of the electoral process, as a strong force among Afghans, with the capacity to order politics: the domestic elections monitoring effort, performed by more than 40 Afghan civil society groups, was technically superior to both the international observation and to the preparedness of JEMB and Afghan government staff. Afghan society as a whole behaved in a remarkably civil way during the elections.
 - a. The Free and Fair Elections Foundation (FEFA) fielded more than 2000 trained observers in about 100 districts, in each province of the country, including Nuristan, Nimroz, Badghis etc. In many cases these observers and their supervisors helped out JEMB staff. On elections day FEFA had reports from all the provinces and could issue an early press release. FEFA criticized the JEMB but congratulated the Afghan people.
 - b. The Human Rights Commission fielded about 250 observers and issued a press release the day after the elections, with a similar tone and message to that of FEFA
 - c. Groups like the Journalists’ Union, the Afghan Organization for Human Rights and Environment Protection, Pharmacists, Youth organizations, NGOs etc. fielded smaller numbers of observers, in different cities of the country and in Pakistan.
 - d. In many cases individual citizens helped out: merchants helped voters get from one polling station where there are no more ballots to other polling stations, people bought markers for the polling stations, men allowed women to vote in their stations and vice-versa (with staff from the opposite sex), and as noted not many people seem to have made use of the option to vote several times.
 - e. Afghan media covered the elections day enthusiastically and participated well in press conferences and discussions, asking critical questions

As a *counterpoint*, it must be noted that Afghan civil society is still weakly organized, even if it has a strong basis. Few of the above organizations were trusted by either Afghans or foreigners before the elections, because they are incipient, weak and quite disorganized.

4. The international community has misjudged the electoral situation on several accounts
 - a. Security was the main concern, distracting attention from other vital issues. Many tons of cement protection blocks and many millions of dollars for extra foreign security forces were not justified given the peaceful atmosphere. Instead JEMB's recruitment, training and logistics should have been better prepared
 - b. "Warlords" did not make strong attempts, apparently, to influence the voting. They have been losing political power since the Emergency Loya Jirga but the international community fails to appreciate this fact and concentrated on it as a threat to free and fair elections
 - c. The Joint Elections Management Body, and its Secretariat headed by Farooq Wardak, was not capable of organizing the electoral process sufficiently well. This is symptomatic of the Afghan government that the international community is "building" without input from the Afghan people.
 - d. Afghan civil society and the will of the people to participate in the political process were once again underestimated. There was a focus on how to "manage" the elections knowing what its result would be, instead of on how to support true, "bottom-up" democratic social development.

Counterpoints: the international community, by emphasizing security, doubtlessly contributed to a peaceful elections atmosphere and the safety of the voters. The same arguably might be said about neutralizing warlord influence. Operating through Afghan institutional partners has better learning effects than if the UN were to organize the elections alone.

5. The truth is that the Afghan people seem much more ready for democracy and democratic political institutions in Afghanistan than the international community, and the non-elected government it supports. In that sense the farce of the whole electoral process was patent to everybody who witnessed it. There was no real opposition, no real campaigning, no political programs were presented by any of the candidates, and everybody seems to know that the main purpose of the polls, for those who organized them, was to re-elect Karzai and keep in place the coalition government made in Bonn - for another 5 years. Afghans accept this as a better scenario than the civil war they've emerged from, and believe that they may personally prosper in the current situation. However they strongly indicate that they want more democratic politics and a chance to elect their representatives.

Recommendations:

6. There must be an enquiry into the shortcomings of the JEMB (and the bodies that supported it) and responsibilities must be determined. After all, the JEMB is also supposed to organize the upcoming elections.
7. The International Community must reconsider its current strategy of rapid political party building. Candidates (for the future parliament) should preferably be exposed to electoral politics and be chosen, rather than step forward to take advantage of the many facilities offered by international organizations who are eager to help the formation of political parties and create some kind of resemblance of democracy. The formation of political parties, if that is what the Afghan people

want, should be a gradual and natural process informed by the popular base of the parties, not by foreign institutions such as the National Democratic Institute.

8. At the same time, consideration must be given to representative politics that are not based on the existence of political parties. It is not clear to Afghans (or to this writer) why a Parliament cannot be composed of individuals representing their constituencies rather than their political party.
9. Afghan civil society groups should be encouraged to prepare for the upcoming elections and become involved in other political issues that affect the wider public. Although there is not much the international community can (or should) do to organize this, assistance in fields determined by the civil society groups would be most useful for the healthy development of Afghan society.
10. For the above reasons, the focus for the future should be on electing municipal, district and provincial councils, or “bottom-up” representation of the Afghan people, rather than the continuing “top-down” construction of “democratic” political institutions. The parliamentary elections should be the outcome of this process, not its motor.