

## Research Paper

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# Electoral Turnout in Afghanistan: An Act of Defiance?

# Summary

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- Voting in Afghanistan's presidential and provincial council elections on 5 April was marked by a higher turnout and better security than had been expected.
- Voters at polling stations were determined and some were enthusiastic, but in many cases this was not enthusiasm for particular candidates. Rather, it represented a rejection of both insurgent attempts to disrupt the election and the attempts of existing Afghan elites, particularly the regime of President Hamid Karzai, to consolidate their grasp on power.
- Concerns now centre on the counting process, as well as the likelihood that candidates will accuse one another of fraud and that Karzai, the Independent Electoral Commission or the international community will meddle in the election results.
- High-profile Taliban attacks have received wide international media coverage, not least because journalists themselves have been targeted, but these do not seem to have deterred Afghans, including women, from voting.
- The elections are potentially a milestone in the continued democratization of Afghanistan, but there are many hazards ahead, particularly in the coming months, that could undermine this process.
- The international community has a role in helping to ensure that these elections result in a peaceful transfer of power. Particularly if the results are disputed, it should avoid hasty reactions, continue to insist upon the legitimacy of the process, and adopt a unified approach in responding to Afghan expectations of its role in mediation. Specifically, the international community can:
  - Provide support for a transparent counting and complaints process, coupled with an awareness that some corruption and fraud are likely;
  - Prepare to step in as an unbiased mediator if disputes are raised between candidates; and
  - Commit to continue supporting electoral institutions in Afghanistan, particularly looking ahead to 2015.

# Electoral Turnout in Afghanistan: An Act of Defiance?

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## Introduction

This paper, the second of three on voter perceptions in the Afghan elections, analyses the reactions of a select group of Afghans to the elections in urban areas. It is based upon ongoing research and data collected in the weeks before and during the elections. This has been undertaken by experienced Afghan and international researchers who covered the 2009/10 elections in the same areas of Kabul, allowing for comparative analysis. Respondents included a broad sample of voters, young and old, literate and illiterate, male and female, from a range of occupations, ethnic groups and backgrounds.

Observing at a series of polling stations in and around Kabul, Chatham House-sponsored researchers were struck by the high turnout in Afghanistan's presidential and provincial council elections on 5 April. The determination to vote resulted in long lines at polling stations in the morning and at least a steady stream of voters in the afternoon. At one station in a northern Kabul neighbourhood visited there was a line of over a thousand people at around 1 pm. While initial reports have largely echoed these findings, there is also a need to wait until all parts of the country have submitted reports on turnout to the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC). Already, *The New York Times* has reported empty polling stations in Nangarhar<sup>1</sup> and it remains to be seen what type of results will come from other stations in unstable and/or remote areas.

In all of the stations observed, authorities from both the IEC and Afghan security forces appeared well organized and prepared. Last-minute security measures, such as the Kabul-wide ban on all text messages for the day, seemed to be effective in preventing any attacks in Kabul and resulted in only a handful of more minor attacks across the country. At the same time, however, while security enforcement was much more rigorous than in 2009 and 2010, it was not always clear that security forces or IEC members were sure of what they were enforcing. At one station a researcher was turned away because he did not have the 'proper identification', although he was admitted to many others where his certified IEC badge was accepted. At one point an international observers was told that foreigners were not allowed in the district that day. Similarly, while there were national observers at all the polling stations visited, they were not distributed evenly. Some stations had almost no monitors from civil society or representing presidential candidates and only had monitors representing provincial council candidates, while in other areas the former were prevalent. It is possible that such uneven monitoring could have an impact on the electoral complaints period.

More worryingly, several arrests have already been made for ballot stuffing,<sup>2</sup> and there have been reports of stations running out of ballot papers in several different areas. Researchers found two

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<sup>1</sup> 'Apathy and fear of Taliban combine to keep rural voters away from the polls', *New York Times*, 6 April 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/06/world/asia/apathy-and-fear-of-taliban-combine-to-keep-rural-voters-away-from-the-polls.html>.  
<sup>2</sup> 'Afghan elections: 6 people arrested over ballot stuffing so far', *Khaama Press*, 5 April 2014, <http://www.khaama.com/afghan-elections-6-people-arrested-over-ballot-stuffing-so-far-2958>.

stations in Kabul that had done so. Other stations visited in Kabul and four districts to the north seemed to have sufficient stocks, though researchers did hear rumours during the day of other stations running out. So far, reports of irregularities are far lower than they were in 2009 and 2010, but they still leave the door open for candidates to use these irregularities to dispute the final results (this is discussed further below) and already varying reports put the number of complaints in the thousands.<sup>3</sup>

### Enthusiasm, but for what?

It is tempting to jump to the conclusion that long lines at polling stations equate to enthusiasm for elections, but the grim mood of voters at many of the stations made it clear that there was still a great deal of concern about the future of the country. Overall, the mood was much more subdued than it had been in 2009 or 2010 at the same polling stations. No agents for candidates were seen by the researchers near the stations, and voters themselves made few overt attempts to display support for their favourite candidates. In the 2009 election, buttons or hats with Abdullah Abdullah's face on them were popular in one town with a large Tajik majority. These were not in evidence during this round of voting. Perhaps because of the rain, there was also less lingering around the polling stations after voters had cast their ballots than was observed in 2009.

Interviews with these voters suggest that that there is a desire for change: an end to the instability generated by insurgent attacks and an end to the growing corruption associated with the Karzai regime. Voters said that what they want is a smooth transition away from the status quo, but that they are not sure which candidate would deliver this. For example, several remarked that Zelmai Rassoul is not particularly charismatic and his campaign not very strong, yet many had decided to vote for him because he was the most 'moderate' candidate. In contrast, Abdullah Abdullah did not seem to have the same overwhelming support in the stations visited in areas associated with the Northern Alliance, perhaps because he is no longer the single, clear opposition candidate as was the case in 2009.

This is indicative of candidates' varying degrees of success in mobilizing their bases. For example, in one ethnically diverse area of Kabul visited, a rather high percentage of Hazaras and Tajiks and a rather low turnout from Pashtuns were observed. This could have been simply an effect of the time that stations were visited, but it could also indicate a higher turnout from minority populations. Many of those interviewed in these groups feel as if they have made progress in creating a balance between Pashtuns and other ethnicities over the past ten years and want to push for even greater inclusion in the government for minority groups (several criticized the assumption that the leader of Afghanistan should be a Pashtun). This, combined with the greater number of polling stations that were closed owing to insecurity in the Pashtun east and south, could explain some of the

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<sup>3</sup> 'Fraud complaints mar early election count in Afghanistan', *Newsweek*, 7 April 2014, <http://www.newsweek.com/fraud-complaints-mar-early-election-count-afghanistan-244397>.

eagerness of smaller groups to embrace elections, but could also potentially spell heightened ethnic tensions in the long term, particularly if there are more nationwide discrepancies in turnout by ethnic groups.

## Potential for meddling

While most interviewed on election day were happy with how the voting was proceeding, many made it clear that they had concerns about the rest of the electoral process. The counting of ballots and the registration of complaints still presents several opportunities for irregularities. This is aggravated by the fact that fraud is likely to be more sophisticated and harder to detect this time around than some of the amateurish ballot stuffing seen in 2009 and 2010. One person pointed to increased security as actually making it easier for the system to be corrupted from within since fewer people were allowed into polling stations.

At the same time, the long counting process allows candidates and other political actors time to try to manipulate the outcome. On election day Ashraf Ghani, and shortly afterwards Abdullah Abdullah, both gave television interviews in which they praised the courage of voters but also pointed to issues such as the reports of stations running out of ballot papers. These and other accusations of irregularities give candidates who may not be ahead in the polling the opportunity to undermine the system by complaining about various aspects of it. It is remarkable, given the corruption of 2009 and 2010, that the Afghan people still have any faith at all in the electoral system, and what faith they do have is fragile. Perceived back-room negotiations, non-transparency in the counting process and the ultimate declaration of the winner all still have the potential to undermine any progress towards democratization that has been made in Afghanistan. The top candidates' initial statements certainly make it sound as if they are willing to disrupt that progress to further their own causes.

The international community has been cautiously optimistic so far in expressing congratulations to Afghanistan for its 'successful' election.<sup>4</sup> With several weeks of complaints ahead before the final results are announced, while voters watch warily as politicians attempt to undermine their votes, the international community would be wise to carefully calibrate its response.

## Critical times ahead

The relatively successful election on 5 April, with its high turnout and limited security incidents, marks a critical milestone in Afghanistan's political transition. Anticipated spectacular attacks, coupled with widespread ballot stuffing, did not take place largely owing to the enormous scale of national and international efforts to protect the electoral process, and to Afghan voters' own bravery

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<sup>4</sup> 'Obama congratulates Afghanistan on election turnout', *The Guardian*, 5 April 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/05/barack-obama-congratulates-afghanistan-elections>.

and defiance of would-be spoilers. Nevertheless, this is only the first milestone in a long and challenging route to the establishment of a new government: a route beset with hazards and hurdles. The success of the day will only serve to heighten public expectations of a transparent counting process, putting enormous pressure on the IEC to demonstrate publicly its commitment to a vote-count that is free of government meddling and closed-door deals. The legitimacy of the new government is still very much in the balance and depends heavily on the performance of Afghanistan's electoral institutions.

To this end, the international community needs to consider how best to support the IEC and Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) as they undertake this great responsibility. Several steps should be taken in this regard, which will help preserve and build on some of the momentum that has been created. These include:

- **Support for a transparent counting and complaints process, coupled with an awareness that some corruption and fraud are likely.** Given the drawn-out nature of the counting process and the technical difficulties it presents, there is a need to avoid any rushed public statements about the process and to prepare for the likelihood of at least moderate corruption among all candidates (hence the need to avoid any sort of zero-tolerance policy).
- **Preparation to step in as an unbiased mediator if disputes are raised between candidates.** While there is an inclination in the international community to take the position that any disputes are an internal Afghan political issue, many Afghans themselves believe that the international community, including the UN, can serve as a more effective mediator between parties than any internal actor which is inherently involved in the ethnic politics of the country. The international community could play a key role here in ensuring a smooth transition.
- **Continued support for electoral institutions in Afghanistan, particularly looking ahead to 2015.** If nothing else, these elections have demonstrated that the IEC and the Afghan security forces have made great strides since 2009. Their coordinated efforts need to continue to be strengthened before 2015, when local politics, feuds and community divisions are likely to make the local polls even more contested than in 2014 (since communities in the presidential election tended to vote in blocs).
- **More broadly, continued work to allow the Afghan government as chosen by the Afghan people to stand on its own.** The turnout in the poll on 5 April was, more than anything, an affirmation by the country's people of their determination to select their own government. This demonstrated a rejection of insurgents who threatened the polls, but also of politicians who have attempted to increase their monopoly of resources over the past decade. As international forces continue their withdrawal and development funds decrease, there is still much that the international community can do to ensure that the people of Afghanistan continue to have the ability to shape their own future.

## About the authors

**Anna Larson** is a researcher affiliated with the University of York working on elections, democratization and local governance in fragile states. She worked in Afghanistan between 2004 and 2010, most recently leading research programmes in governance for the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU). She is the co-author with Noah Coburn of *Derailed Democracy in Afghanistan* (Columbia, 2014), an analysis of Afghanistan's 2009 and 2010 elections and their repercussions.

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## About this publication

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