Elections are not enough

Once the warm feeling of a successful election fades, the hard work for democracy really begins. Afghanistan is at that stage now and the lessons have much wider relevance for Iraq and beyond.

As a means for legitimising new political arrangements, elections are very much at the top of the global political agenda. After the voting for Iraq's Transitional National Assembly at the end of January, United States President, George Bush, labelled it the 'world's newest democracy'.

Similar assertions have been made about Afghanistan where they have better claim to substance, since the threats to security come from Pakistan-based militias rather than well armed local spoilers. Nonetheless, the transition to stable politics in Afghanistan has some way to go, and an awareness of what remains to be accomplished serves as a warning against premature celebration in Iraq. Elections are only one part of much more complex processes of political change.

Superficially, Afghanistan seems well on track to its next milestone—parliamentary elections together with elections for provincial and district councils. However, conducting such polling successfully, and in making a new parliament work, is a much more arduous task than has hitherto been appreciated. Strong, co-opting support will be required from the wider world if such tricky terrain is to be safely negotiated.

Clear Mandate

Afghanistan's presidential election, in October, was a notable success in several ways. Almost seventy percent of registered voters turned out. Large scale polling day violence was avoided, thanks to a careful deployment of Afghan and international forces, supplemented by pressure on Pakistan, from whose territory remnants of the Taliban movement continued to operate openly.

As in Iraq, local electoral staff discharged their responsibilities for the most part with great care. While there were problems with the indelible ink used to prevent multiple voting, these were not nearly on a scale that could have affected the final outcome. By winning over 50% of the vote, President Hamid Karzai easily avoided the need for a runoff, and was sworn into office with a clear public mandate enabling a wide-ranging reconstruction of his cabinet.

Spreading power

To appreciate the political significance of the parliamentary elections, it is...
necessity to look back to the Loya Jirga of December 2003, which finalised the new constitution. Delegates were divided over whether there should be a presidential or parliamentary system. This is a question of extreme sensitivity that is also likely to surface with a vengeance in Iraq as constitution drafting gets underway.

A presidential system was strongly favoured for Afghanistan by members of the Uzbek ethnic group who see in their power in the country, although not necessarily an absolute majority. Other delegations—and a number of experts on constitutional design in disputed states—were more sympathetic to a parliamentary system that would help spread power across a range of political forces. The outcome was a compromise, with both an elected president and an elected parliament, although one with limited powers in the key area of fiscal management.

Choosing a system

The postponement of parliamentary elections until this month was necessary on logistical grounds, but a new date has now been set for September. Any further delay risks affecting, not only those that see presidential and parliamentary elections as a single package rather than discrete events, but also candidates who expected the presidency to raise their profiles for the subsequent parliamentary poll.

If the transition is not completed, a significant diminution of external resources will be required to support the next stage, especially given the loss of experienced electoral staff following the presidential election and the subsequent kidnapping of some international electoral officials.

A further political complication lies in the choice of electoral system for parliamentary elections. Time pressures dictate what can realistically be done. In Iraq, the only systems that could meet the timetable, set by Asstollah Ali Sistani and his associates in their discussions with UN officials early last year, were those that treated the country as a single constituency.

Different electoral systems have different political consequences, and choices need to be made to reflect the needs of particular countries. In divided societies with fragile state structures, there is much to be said for systems that award seats to different forces in proportion to their electoral support.

Such a process was used in Iraq. In Afghanistan, Karzai rejected this option in favour of the single non-transferable vote under which seats are assigned to provinces in proportion to their estimated populations. Voters simply choose a single candidate at provincial level, and seats are allocated to individual candidates in order of the number of votes received.

The virtue of the system is its simplicity for voters. Its great weaknesses, however, is its potential to produce perverse outcomes. If, for example, a strong candidate emerged in a province with ten seats and won ninety percent of the vote, he or she would still only win one seat. The remaining ninety percent of seats would be allocated to candidates who in total secured only ten percent of the votes. This is exactly the kind of outcome to be avoided where losers may have the option of engaging in spoiler behaviour as an alternate way of preserving their political claims.

No Place for Parties

The system may have appealed to the president not only because of its simplicity, but also because it weakens the position of organized political parties. Unless parties have exceptionally sophisticated and disciplined supporters, who can be divided into blocs to back different party candidates, it is more than likely that the bulk of votes will go to a party’s leading candidate, and a significant number will in effect be wasted.

Many political parties in Afghanistan are poorly regarded by voters. Some of them have little more than covers for predatory armed militias. They are the most likely source of intimidation in the forthcoming election, and Karzai, who won as an independent, does not have a developed political machine to support him in a party-driven election. Proportional systems can also give significant power to party bottlenecks.

Nonetheless it is worth bearing Afghan history in mind. The parliaments elected in 1906 and 1909 did not function efficiently. A key reason was the failure of the then king, Zahir Shah, to ratify a bill on political parties, meaning that the lower house, the Wolesi Jirga, was—with the exception of the communist deputies, virtually a chamber of independents.

Few members brought a national vision to politics; many focused simply on extracting what resources they could from the corrupt state bureaucracy in the hope that they could be re-elected or live more comfortably if they were not. Some politicians dealt cut-and-thrust behind the scenes rather. A parliament of this sort would be disastrous for present-day Afghanistan.

Making it work

Making a new parliament work is a serious challenge in a poor and underdeveloped state. The country’s needs are so great that spending on democracy may easily seem wasteful or excessive. The cost of the initial presidential and parliamentary elections is likely to be hundreds of millions of dollars and is in any case, whether high-intensity electoral processes are a sustainable option, even in purely financial terms.

If elections are to be more than a warm but fading memory for Afghans, it may be necessary to consider an international trust fund for democratisation to finance future polls in Afghanistan and other similar states.

Parliamentary organisation and