Afghans go to the polls to elect a president on October 9. It will be the most far-reaching exercise of popular choice in the country's history. The vote, three years after the Taliban was driven from power and just over three weeks before the American presidential election, will be followed next spring by polls to elect a new parliament.

It has become conventional wisdom that President George Bush needs a foreign policy success if he is to win re-election in the United States. Since success is not likely in Iraq, runs the argument, it has to be Afghanistan, the president's other main overseas adventure. This wisdom almost certainly overestimates the impact of 'victories' in American eyes. Even so, Washington has been keen to fulfil the commitment it made at Bonn in December 2001, shortly after Afghanistan's Taliban government was driven out of Kabul, to restore constitutional government to the country after 23 long years of war.

It is not coincidental that the presidential election, the first opportunity most adult Afghans have ever had to vote in a national-wide poll, takes place just twenty-four days before American voters cast their ballots to determine whether or not Bush will get a second term. If a candidate wins an outright majority a run-off will take place two weeks later, just ten days before Americans vote.

Educated Afghans believe that will not be enough that the election takes place. Bush needs victory for Hamid Karzai, the man long-pedaled for the post by the US as the Bonn conference who has occupied it on an acting basis every since. He was endorsed as interim president in mid-2002 by representatives of his countrymen at a bono jirga or grand assembly, which also chose a republican form of government rather than a monarchy.

A second jirga last December and January signed on a new democratic constitution, which concentrates power in the presidency and paves the way for presidential and parliamentary elections.

Fortunately for those writing the script, it is likely that Karzai will be chosen as president, not least because of the large number of candidates - seventeen - who are standing against him. While there is opposition to the man who has supplanted Afghanistan's aged king, Zahir Shah, at the face and voice of the country abroad, it is not united.

This month's poll will show whether Karzai enjoys favour among the ten million or so Afghan the UN says have registered to vote, as he does amongst his foreign sponsors.

**FINDING VOTERS**

Even that number is causing difficulties since it exceeds earlier UN figures for eligible adults. Estimates of the country's total population range between eighteen and 25 million, no census has been held since 1979 when a population of thirteen and a half million was recorded.

Previously the UN said that 10 percent of the country was insecure and beyond the reach of electoral registration officials, both Afghan and expatriate. For the target of registrations to have been achieved without entering these areas suggests that many Afghan people have registered more than once, or else that estimates of the numbers eligible were too low.

Arrangements are in hand to enable adults amongst the two and a half million Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran to take part too.

The insecure areas containing much of southern Afghanistan south of the city of Kandahar are considered to be under the sway of the Taliban. They have regularly been able to strike against both local and foreign targets, including in the capital Kabul, in pursuit of their vendetta against anyone cooperating with America.

Others in the ethnically Pashtun south may not support the Taliban but will feel alienated because the Kandai government is dominated by Tajiks, the main ethnic group in the north. This reflects the fact that it was the Tajik dominated Northern
Alliance that drove the largely Pashtun Taliban from Kabul.

**GREATER THREAT**

Karzai is himself a Pashtun and is likely to garner most Pashtun votes, but that may not be enough, given that Pashtun homelands in the insecure south are thought to have the lowest voter registration, as a result of Taliban threats that have prevented registration officials reaching all areas. America sees the Taliban as the greatest threat to the election with its ability to disrupt polling in large swaths of the country. It has been blamed for attacks on aid workers and election registration officials. However, in Kabul it is the warlords who are regarded as the greatest threat.

Some of Karzai’s election rivals, like the recent deputy defense minister General Abdul Rashid Dostum, command armies of their men hiding away in different parts of the country. Dostum’s power base lies close to the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif, historical battlefield of Attila.

Karzai has often criticized the culture of warlordism that severely limits the power and reach of the central government across what, in that respect, remains a medieval country, though some of the regional warlords sit in his own government. To varying degrees they have been allies of the American-led coalition in their pursuit of Taliban remnants. Five provinces around the western city of Herat have been the personal fiefdom of warlord Zakari Zia Khan, a cheapo Karzai decided not to include the powerful defence minister, Mohammad Qasim. On his trip to visit presidential candidates showing an uncharacteristic self-confidence. The weakness of Qasim’s position is characterised by the epithet “mayor of Kabul”, which suggests his reach does not reach much beyond the capital. Even there he is portrayed as something of a hostage to the Northern Alliance which dominates his cabinet, especially loyal to the then mujahedeen commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, “lion of the Panjshir valley”. These include Kabul as well as presidential contender Yarom Qarnai, who has held both interior and agriculture posts. Massoud was assassinated two days before September 11 2001, yet his picture dominates streets and offices in Kabul, suggesting a following much larger than that for Karzai or former king, Zahir Shah, who has been a fairly low-key candidate for the restoration of the monarchy. Present day loyalty towards Massoud and his heirs has yet to be tested in the ballot box, though there can be little doubt that the Masonic faction of the Jamiat-i-Islami has strong support in Pashto-speaking regions.

Karzai would be happy if the presidential pull turns into a contest between supporters of peace, democracy and stability and those who prefer the gun. Ethnic alliances will never be out of sight. Another presidential contender, Mohammad Mohaqiq, counts for his backing the Hazaras, the smallest of the major ethnic groups, who are Shia Muslims rather than Sunnis as most Afghans are. Issues of language, ethnicity and religion will count for more than party policies in a nation whose people are unused to choosing their leaders and where political parties are a new concept.

**FOLLOW THE LEADER**

Where free voting does take place the likelihood is that people, especially women, will be voting for a candidate chosen by the village elder or the imam of the local mosque, probably the best educated. Thus the prospects of the sole woman presidential candidate, medical doctor, Zesmin Belal, one of the few Afghan husbands would not allow their wives to vote for a candidate of their own choice, and men will not vote for a woman leader. Afghanistan’s very high illiteracy level, up to ninety percent in some areas, suggests the election will not be based on individual acts of free choice. Yet a successful exercise of choice by village or group will itself be regarded as an historic advance.

Consider in any case how the candidates will campaign. Poor infrastructure and security mean they will not be able to travel widely across a country larger than France. Yet where means of addressing the electorate are severely limited, Central television, untested after being banned under the Taliban, only reaches Kabul with very restricted local stations in other parts of the country. Afghan radio is little better, though some cities are now served by independent stations broadcasting on low power. The largest publication, the weekly magazine KiliKili, has a nation-wide circulation of fewer than ten thousand.

Karzai knows from experience that the way to reach the largest number of Afghans is through an interview to one of the foreign broadcasters, led by the BBC, which during the long war years filled the information gap by providing the most accurate alternative to a national news service, improving local broadcast and print media. It is key to many Afghan efforts facing the new government.

Karzai says strengthening the economy is his top priority. The aim is to move the country from its present poverty level of $200 a year per capita gross domestic product to between $700 and $1000 within ten years. As an indication of just how far Afghanistan has fallen behind, the West turner to become Indonesia’s president promised to raise that country’s annual per capita gross domestic product from $990 to $1,718 in five years.

**GROWTH CROP**

The new leader will have to find alternative forms of income to replace the growing of opium poppies. Currently that crop produces the largest share of gross domestic product, apart from foreign aid. Despite the efforts of a British-funded project, opium production has increased each year since the Taliban fell and now provides 95 percent of illicit global heroin.

Another priority is to strengthen national security forces, those on the government’s payroll rather than the many private armies that date from the mujahedeen anti-soviet war, so that they can eventually take over from the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

With manpower that has only recently exceeded six thousand troops, ISAF has its work cut out to keep the peace in Kabul and, more recently, in up to a dozen regional outposts in small security-critical development units known as Provincial Reconstruction Teams. The largest, American-led, coalition force of up to sixty thousand soldiers continues its operations to track down Taliban and Al Qaeda as part of Bush’s war on terror. Its success in this will have its own impact on the US presidential race.

From outside Afghanistan, Karzai, the westernised former businessman, seems the best bet to continue the task he began nearly three years ago. But, his closeness to the poors who put him in office is a major concern. His work as with the US led forces in Iraq, he is open to the charge of being a creature of the west whose interests are higher than those of his own people or nation.

For Karzai electoral success will depend heavily on the free nature of the vote and the extent to which warlords are able to disrupt the process, or to force a result through intimidation. The second factor determining Karzai’s prospects is whether he is perceived by the Afghan people to be working for the good of Afghanistan rather than as a pawn of the US – and lastly whether the Taliban and warlords are judged to be a less positive light. Whoever is elected president will have several months to establish his authority before the Afghan people get another chance to vote – this time for a new parliament.