

Empire in quandary over Afghan vote rigging

Friday 23 October 2009, by [SULEHRIA Farooq](#) (Date first published: 1 October 2009).

What Taliban failed to achieve in Afghan presidential elections held on August 20, Hamid Karzai has managed to accomplish. "President Barack Obama's new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan needs a legitimate and credible outcome from this election in order to build support for what is now America's longest war both at home and abroad", writes Bruce Riedel (*Daily Times*, Aug. 30). Senior Fellow in the Saban Centre for Middle East policy at the Brookings Institution, Riedel chaired a strategic review of American policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan last winter at Obama's request.

The "legitimate and credible outcome" has been delegitimised and rendered incredible by Karzai's vote rigging to an extent that New York Times is now complaining: "Afghan vote uncertainty sparks dilemma for U.S. ".

To legitimise, a run-off is a must. If a run-off is organised, it can not be held until spring next year as snow will make many parts of the country inaccessible. Most importantly, a run-off may not necessarily lead to a win for Karzai. The ethnic divide proved useful for Karzai, representing country's largest ethnic group (Pashtuns), in the first phase since other major ethnic groups like Hazaras, Tajiks and Uzbeks in general voted for their respective candidates. In run-off stage, all non-Pashtun may join hands to ensure that Afghanistan gets a non-Pashtun president for the first time in country's history.

"There is an exquisite dilemma here," Bruce Riedel told *New York Times*. He thinks: "The strategy requires an Afghan government that is credible and legitimate, both to get Afghans to support it and to get Americans and their allies to help. The strategy can't work around a South Vietnamese-style government." A run-off would be preferable to a discredited first-round Karzai victory, according to Riedel. (NYT, Sept. 17)

In an earlier report, the same newspaper even reported a split among Western officials managing Afghan affairs: "That split was thrust into public view this week when Ambassador Peter W Galbraith, an American who is the No. 2 official at the United Nations Mission here, abruptly returned to the United States after a disagreement with the top United Nations officer in Kabul, Kai Eide, about how aggressively to push the Afghan government. Mr. Galbraith favored a more assertive posture. "This election," Mr. Galbraith added, "should be decided mathematically by an honest count of votes, cast by voters, and not politically." (NYT, Sept. 15)

Though Obama was quick on the evening of August 20 to announce the victory for democracy in Afghanistan yet a day after his statement, US special envoy to the region Richard Holbrooke is said to have held an "explosive" meeting with Hamid Karzai at which he raised concerns about ballot-stuffing. Holbrooke is believed to have pushed for a run-off during the tense and short-lived meeting with Karzai. The meeting ended in a shouting match and Mr Holbrooke stormed out, according to media reports.

No official election result has yet been announced but preliminary results have given Karzai 54.6 per cent of the vote, enough to avoid a second round against his main rival Abdullah Abdullah, a former foreign minister, who has 27.7 per cent. But election observers from the European Union have said that up to 1.5 million of the ballots could be fraudulent, leaving open the possibility for a dramatic

turn if the ballots are annulled after investigations.

The UN-backed Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) has ordered recounts at more than 2,500 polling stations, around 10 per cent of the total, after it found "clear and convincing evidence of fraud". However, a bitter Karzai told a news conference: "I believe firmly, firmly in the integrity of the election and the integrity of the Afghan people, and the integrity of the government in that process." Perhaps with George Bush's victory in mind, he added: "Media has reported major fraud. It wasn't that big. If there was fraud, it was small. It happens all over the world," This is something even Halbrooke agrees upon. "That's politics, Afghan-style," Holbrooke told CNN. "That happens in Western democracies as well. We have charges repeatedly in American elections by candidates that the other side is not allowing [would-be voters] to register. We should not be surprised that democracy is imperfect even in Western countries".

Karzai, however, even "believes the United States is denouncing his family and political allies in an effort to undermine his position". In an interview with the French daily Le Figaro, Karzai said the United States is using "underhanded" tactics to undermine him.

It seems Ahmedinejad read Karzai's statement in Le Figaro. He was quick in expressing solidarity with Karzai. No pun intended but according to a press release issued on September 17 by Afghan Presidency, President Ahmadinejad has congratulated President Karzai on re-election. The press release reads:" Dr. Ahmadinejad, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran called President Karzai on Thursday evening to congratulate him on his re-election in Afghanistan Presidential elections.Iran's President congratulated the people of Afghanistan for holding a successful election and hoped the recent elections would lead to further prosperity and progress in their country. President Karzai thanked Dr. Ahmadinejad and wished his nation prosperity and blessing".

P.S.

* Farooq Sulehria's ZSpace Page.