

Afghanistan's showcase elections

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Unlike 2005, the Afghan general elections scheduled for September 18---second such exercise since US occupation---are hardly mentioned these days if one tunes to BBC or CNN. When they talk about approaching Afghan elections, legitimately grave concerns are expressed at the law and order situation. The Afghan election Commission itself thinks that out of a planned 6,835 polling stations, only 5,897 can be opened. Neither the Afghan army nor NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) is willing to guarantee the safety of the remaining 938 — fully 14 percent of the planned total. Not merely 2500 candidates (400 of them women) contesting for 249 Lower House (Wolesi Jirga) seats are afraid to campaign, it is also extremely uncertain how many out of Afghanistan's 17.5 million eligible voters will dare vote.

It is not merely security that will make voters stay away from elections. The fact that they have to vote one killer or the other, has also led to voters' antipathy towards electoral process. In some cases, to vent their anger they would spill red ink over the election posters of certain war lords.

Warlords dominate the process:

According to a report, ninety percent of the Wolesi Jirga members elected in 2005 have been certified to seek re-election. One lawmaker has been disqualified, 15 are retiring and 10 died or were killed while in office.

The sitting MPs include 40 commanders associated with armed groups, 24 belong to criminal gangs, 17 are drug traffickers and 19 of them face allegations of war crimes and human rights violations. An even grim analysis by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission found that over 80 percent of provincial lawmakers and more than 60 percent of those elected in Kabul back in 2005 had "links to armed groups" (Mc Clatchy, September 14).

In July, Afghanistan's Electoral Complaint Commission (ECC) responsible for vetting candidates and investigating allegations of electoral fraud, disqualified 36 candidates on evidence they had ties to illegal private militias. The efficiency of vetting process can be gauged from the fact that Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, Mohaqiq and Yunus Qanooni---to cite only a few examples---are contesting elections. They have been nominated as war criminal by several human rights bodies and is a notorious warlord.

In my home province, we believe most of the 80 candidates contesting provincial elections had been accused of crimes. My friends and relatives in other provinces say the same thing about the election candidates in their respective provinces.

A number of Taliban are also contesting and are most likely to enter the next parliament. Taliban movement has appealed to vote for such candidates even if Taliban are opposed to elections

otherwise.

New faces stand no chance:

True, there are some new and young faces among the candidates. A few are honest and are not warlords. Ramzan Bashardost is a good example to cite in this respect. Similarly, one can mention a brave woman from Kunhar, Gulhar. Most importantly, a Hindu woman Anar Kali is again contesting from a Kabul constituency. But the new and young candidates stand no chance against the all powerful warlords. Warlords and those linked backed by Western countries, Pakistan or Iran were able to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on canvassing. Money will also be used to buy votes. Another factor is corruption. One having more dollars and consequently guns, is able to influence the voting as well as vote count. As a result, a parliament that will come into being as a result of these showcase elections may serve the purpose of US occupation in rubber stamping certain decisions to legitimize rebranding of Afghan occupation. Such a parliament will not offer any hope to Afghans.

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