

AFGHANISTAN: Karzai and Warlords Mount Massive Vote Fraud Scheme

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Afghanistan's presidential election has long been viewed by U.S. officials as a key to conferring legitimacy on the Afghan government, but Afghan President Hamid Karzai and his powerful warlord allies have planned to commit large-scale electoral fraud that could have the opposite effect.

Two U.S.-financed polls published during the past week showed support for Karzai falls well short of the 51 percent of the vote necessary to avoid a runoff election. A poll by Glevum Associates showed Karzai at 36 percent, and a survey by the International Republican Institute had him at 44 percent of the vote.

Those polls suggest that Karzai might have to pad his legitimate vote total by much as 40 percent to be certain of being elected in the first round.

But Karzai has been laying the groundwork for just such a contingency for many months. By all accounts, he has forged political alliances with leading Afghan warlords who control informal militias and tribal networks in the provinces to carry out a vote fraud scheme accounting for a very large proportion of the votes.

Karzai chose Muhammad Qasim Fahim, the ethnic Tajik warlord who had been vice-president and defence minister in his government until the 2004 elections, as his running mate. In return for their support, he promised Hazara warlords Haji Muhammad Moheqiq and Karim Khalili that new provinces would be carved out from largely Hazara districts in Ghazni and Wardak provinces, as reported by Richard Opiel of the New York Times.

The socio-political structure of Afghanistan remains so hierarchical that warlords can deliver very large blocs of votes to Karzai by telling their followers to vote for him, and in some provinces - especially in the Pashtun south - by forcing local tribal elders to cooperate in voter fraud schemes.

The system in which warlords pressure tribal elders to deliver the vote for Karzai was illustrated by a village elder in Herat province who said he had been threatened by a local commander with "very unpleasant consequences" if the residents of his village did not vote for Karzai, according to the Institute for War and Peace Reporting.

As early as last May, the country's independent election monitoring organisation, the Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA), had documented a suite of voter registration practices that laid the groundwork for massive voter fraud.

FEFA observers, who observed voter registration in 194 of 400 voting registration centres in

four provinces during one stage of the process, found that nearly 20 percent of the voters registered, on average, were under age – in many cases as young as 12 years old.

It is now estimated that 17 million voter registration cards have been issued, which means that nearly 3.5 million cards may have been issued to children.

FEFA observers also found rampant distribution of multiple voting cards. During the third phase of registration, they observed at least four incidents of such abuses in 85 percent of the centres. The voter registration staff was seen handing out cards even before applicants had been registered.

In one case, the FEFA observers saw about 500 voting cards being given to a single individual.

Another element in the Karzai scheme involves the registration of women without their actually being physically present, often on the basis of lists of names given to the registration officials. The list system for registering women was found in 99 percent of registration stations in Paktika province and 90 percent of those in Zabul and Khost provinces.

During the final phase of the registration, many centres were found to be allowing males to take the registration books home, where they supposedly obtained the fingerprints of the women.

In some of the most insecure and traditional provinces, such as Logar and in Nuristan, more than twice as many cards were issued to women as to men in 2009, and in Paktika, Paktia and Khost, 30 percent more women were registered than were men.

In Kandahar women represent 44 percent of those with voting cards. The young female MP Fawzia Koofi told *The Australian* that such levels of women registered could not be genuine.

The result has been to create a vast pool of voting cards, very few of which will be used by women to vote.

Reports by journalists about the acquisition of voting cards by the local strongmen indicate that this distribution of voting cards to people who would not vote was part of a plan to stuff the ballot boxes to increase the vote for Karzai.

The *Times of London* quoted a tribal elder in Marja district of Helmand province last week as saying that the warlord and former governor Sher Mohammad Akhudzada was organising the vote for Karzai in the province, and that he and other tribal elders were responsible for buying voting cards from voters who had registered.

Independent analyst Alex Strick van Linschoten, who is based in Kandahar, has reported schemes using police to purchase voter registration cards in several districts in the province.

Writing in the *New York Times* magazine Aug. 9, Elizabeth Rubin reported that an unnamed political figure in Kandahar told her in June he had manufactured 8,000 voter “fake” registration cards that had sold for 20 dollars each.

Some observers believe that various factors may constrain Karzai's effort to use warlords to swing the election. Former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ronald E. Neumann told IPS he is counting on the use of indelible ink on the voters' fingers to make it impossible for people to vote more than once.

He recalls, however, that the "indelible" ink used in the 2005 election turned out to be washable after all.

Neumann also hopes the existence of the Election Complaints Commission, an independent body with three international members nominated by the United Nations, will be a check on massive vote fraud.

That body investigates complaints of voter fraud and has the right under Afghan election law to order the invalidation or recounting of votes or even the conducting of new polling where it finds evidence of fraud. But it has no sub-national presence and will be heavily dependent on the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), which handles all the documentary evidence pertaining to such complaints.

More problematic is the fact that the IEC is not "independent" of the Karzai regime at all. Its seven members were all appointed by Karzai, and its chairman has made no secret of his partisan support for the president.

The IEC will likely seek to cover up complaints of major fraud, and the complaints body may not be able to do much about it.

Neumann put the odds of an election that would be "good enough" in the eyes of the Afghans at "50-50".

But counterinsurgency specialists are more pessimistic. Larry Goodson of the U.S. Army College, who was on the U.S. Central Command team that worked on a detailed plan for Afghanistan and Pakistan earlier this year, told IPS, "The reality is there is going to be a lot of cheating and fraud."

Goodson said the danger for the United States in the Karzai election plan is that it "could be perceived by Afghans as promoting the legitimisation of someone who is widely perceived as illegitimate."

Australian counterinsurgency specialist David Kilcullen, who will shortly become a senior adviser to Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, declared at the U.S. Institute of Peace Aug. 6, "The biggest fear is Karzai ends up as an incredibly illegitimate figure, and we end up owning Afghanistan and propping up an illegitimate government."

*Gareth Porter is an investigative historian and journalist specialising in U.S. national security policy. The paperback edition of his latest book, "Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam", was published in 2006.

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