

Giving Democracy the Finger - the failure of the Afghan elections

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Someone once said 'The best President of the United States would have to be dragged kicking and screaming into the White House'. As it is, many of the poor frightened and benighted voters in Afghanistan refused to be dragged kicking and screaming to the polling stations.

The whole point about having to be dragged into a position of power is that only those who sincerely do not seek power are fit to hold power. And of how many of the world's leaders can you say they did not seek election and thus seek power?

Democracy is, so we are led to believe, 'government of the people, for the people, by the people'. The people (of a community, a town, a province) choose one of their number to represent them in the government which is made up of representatives. How nice. Except that democracy as we actually know it means that those who wish to represent us select themselves and the poor voter then has to make the best choice out of what is often a bad lot. To make it worse, almost all candidates are tied to one political party or another, so the successful candidate, however well meaning, is more likely to end up representing the party than the electors. In other words, we'll give you the vote and you give us the power to act in your name. We forget that any election can be (and often is) manipulated, and that holding an election is absolutely no guarantee of democracy.

And this is what we are so keen to export to other countries, often at the point of a gun. Well, forgive them if, after experiencing what the Afghans have gone through before and in the election on 20 August, people end up preferring to put up with the old system of leaving their problem-sorting and governance to their tribal elders. Far from rushing to dip their fingers into the pot of purple indelible ink, they were threatened with having any fingers so tainted cut off.

But did we invade Afghanistan for democracy's sake? No. Before 9/11 Enron and other major oil companies (and of course the United States) were angling to get a pipeline built through Afghanistan so that they could have access to the vast oil and natural gas supplies in the Caspian Basin, the only outlet at the moment being under Russian control (1). There were negotiations with the Taliban, and because the Taliban weren't falling over themselves to please the West, the US administration had for some time been planning to invade Afghanistan to get what they wanted (2). Then came the attack on the World Trade Centre. In less than a month the US, backed by Britain, had taken Operation Enduring Freedom into Afghanistan. *Whose* enduring freedom was not made clear. The stated aim was to find Osama bin Laden and other high-ranking Al-Qaeda, to destroy the whole organization of Al-Qaeda, and (of lesser importance) to remove the Taliban regime which supported and gave

safe harbour to Al-Qaeda.

After a short vicious bombing campaign, ending up at the Tora Bora cave complex, built with the backing of the CIA no less, to house the Mujahideen when, with American support, they were fighting the Russians (3), with troops fruitlessly searching the mountains for Al-Qaeda, the campaign turned its attention to Kabul and the Taliban. Bin Laden was never found, Al-Qaeda was not broken and although the Taliban were removed from power and Hamid Karzai, backed by the West, took over, Afghanistan was no nearer to delivering a pipeline. And President Bush diverted his attention to Iraq. By the time we had invaded and overthrown yet another government that the West had initially supported, trouble was gathering to the east.

Two things became apparent. The Taliban were recovering and regrouping, and the poppy production, almost eradicated by them in their last year in power (following Mullah Omar's ruling in 2000 that poppy cultivation was against Islamic law), had rocketed. So, forget the pipeline, forget bin Laden; we were now there to halt the blooming opium trade, which was, of course, being blamed on the Taliban. All that happened was that poppy production increased to 8,200 tonnes (2007) from the 185 tonnes it had been reduced to in one year under the Taliban (4), Helmand was becoming the centre of Taliban resurgence, the warlords were having a ball and Karzai's rule of the interim administration and then government was seen to be both corrupt and powerless. As the military action in Iraq appeared to be winding down, attention, and troops, returned to Afghanistan. And plans for another even more democratic election were made. Even more democratic, because this time the Afghans themselves would run the show. So rack up the troop numbers to make the country safe to hold elections, because *now* we're there to bring them democracy.

It hasn't worked. After all our efforts, particularly of the British forces in Helmand, to make the country secure enough for the Afghans to go out and vote, it hasn't worked. The British, lacking numbers, helicopters and properly armoured vehicles in fighting to expel the Taliban and keep them out, have failed in everything but casualties (212 dead and counting, of which around 180 have died in the last 2 years). And why should the British and the Taliban fight so fiercely over Helmand? Could it possibly have something to do with the fact that this is the centre of Karzai's support, that this is where he could win or lose the election?

The Panther's Claw operation this year was to be the big push to drive the Taliban out ahead of the election. It achieved something at least. On 22 June, jubilantly reported in a Ministry of Defence press release, the Black Watch captured 1.3 tonnes of poppy seeds, plus an arms cache, hailed as proof that the Taliban were behind the opium trade. The rather large seeds were said to be 'super poppies', but in the end they had to admit they had captured some sacks of mung beans (5). Oh well.

In a Channel 4 News report on the day before the election, the British Ambassador turned up in an area near Lashkar Gar, along with the deputy Governor of Helmand Province to 'encourage people to vote'. He said he was there to assure the people that their government would, with the support of the West, deliver justice, security and all the services they lack. Apart from the fact that Karzai has had eight years to do this and failed, is it right that an ambassador should involve himself in an internal election like this?

Toe-curling as that was, more embarrassment was to come. At the end of the piece the reporter, Lindsey Hilsum, asked a British soldier whether Western powers would ever

succeed in Afghanistan. He replied, 'You know, I think it is winnable. It's not going to happen overnight and everyone recognizes that. But we've got to believe it's doable, because *there would be no point in being here if we didn't.*' No point indeed. The soldier was Lt Col Richardson, who had been seen earlier making a speech to the locals, and I quote: 'My soldiers and I have been sent by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II all the way from Great Britain to help you in your fight against the Taliban. They have laid down their lives for you, to bring peace to your beautiful country.' And I thought we gave up our Empire years ago. I wonder he didn't turn up with a sack full of beads to pay the natives with.

But on 29 August Richardson was on the BBC Today programme being quizzed by the incomparable John Humphries about the low turn out. 'How come,' asked Humphries, 'in an area with a population of 80,000, there are reports of only 150 people turning up to vote?' 'Ah,' says Richardson, 'that is because, although they were still frightened to vote in the rural areas, they travelled to the towns to vote.' That raises two questions, to neither of which I know the answer:

First, having registered yourself so that you were eligible to vote in what were presidential and *provincial* elections, did your registration card allow you to vote in *any* polling station in Afghanistan? And second, why weren't there any reports of urban polling stations being over-run by eager rural voters?

But even before the elections, cases of fraud were coming to light, with stories of wholesale selling of voting cards (6). On the day after the election the UN issued a statement from Ban Ki-moon paying 'tribute to all those who made the largely peaceful polls possible,' ignoring the 400 attacks that accompanied the election. For some days it was talked up as a success, and then the stories of fraud filled the airwaves - large scale fraud, on *all* sides. Democracy, Western style. Why should we be so surprised? It's not as though our elections are lily-white. The last British general election contained postal vote fraud in several constituencies. And Bush notoriously gained power through what many regard as a stolen election.

But the effort to make it seem a success went on. The search for votes and voters in Helmand Province, with the sound-bites, cheerful guesstimations and excuses from politicians and military men reminded me of an earlier occasion - the desperate chattering that went on about the weapons of mass destruction that refused to be found in Iraq. How hard we try to justify our military presence in other people's countries.

The Election Commission, within 10 days of the election, had received more than 2000 complaints of ballot stuffing and fraud, many accompanied with filmed evidence, of which 620 are considered serious. This doesn't include the 25 allegedly filled ballot boxes (that should, as aviation rules regarding cargo dictate, have been properly secured in flight) that 'fell out of' an American Chinook as it flew through the mountains (7). There were reports of polling stations being closed because of 'security' (so no one could vote), reports of ballot boxes being taken from polling stations (before anyone could vote), and flown to Kabul. Figures from four provinces suggested that results have been declared from 28 polling stations which observers had reported were closed (8).

A week before the election, the leaders of the Bariz tribe near Kandahar decided not to vote for Karzai, but to support his main challenger Abdullah Abdullah. On polling day aides of Karzai's brother shut down all 45 polling stations, the ballot boxes were removed, stuffed with Karzai votes and shipped to Kabul. The tribal leaders reckon to have lost 29,300 votes

(9). Then the Election Commission produced figures which showed that in two of the polling centres affected, with 8 polling stations in each, in each of the 16 polling stations there were almost exactly 500 votes for Karzai (a total of 8000 votes) and none for any of the other 31 candidates (10).

Out of a population of roughly 32.75 million, and with 74% of polling stations counted giving a total so far of 4.3 million valid votes, it looks as if no more than 25% of voters actually turned up. Reporting on the stories of fraud, John Humphries (BBC Today programme, 05/09/09) said, 'The results continue to dribble out. At this rate it will be time for another election before we know the results of this one.' The next day it was announced that the votes from some 447 polling stations were being annulled because of fraud, and this is just the start. As every set of released figures is matched by stories of fraud, results are now being delayed as all the Afghan power brokers begin to realise the scale of the mess they have themselves engineered. Afghans are beginning to be deeply suspicious of the delay, and rightly so. The longer the results take to be published (why did it take three weeks to count 1500 votes from one part of Helmand, asked Humphreys on 5 September), the more it will appear that the figures are being manipulated. Karzai *may* achieve over 50% of the vote in the short term, but find that whittled away over the months as the allegations of fraud are substantiated. And as the US is showing signs of withdrawing their support for him (11), he would find it difficult to hang on to what power he has, legally or illegally. Will *any* result from this democratic fiasco be judged legal? Will the Afghans stomach the result, will a result be forced upon them, or will they conclude that 'democracy' is a gift they don't want?

It's not looking good for democracy, and, as people in Britain watch the coffins come home, they question the whole sorry mess. For months now we (and our soldiers) have been asking, *why are we there?* At least some of us remember the different stories we have been told over the last eight years to justify our presence. The more of a failure the election looks, the more our Government representatives push yet another story - that we are there to make our own streets safer. It is, apparently, our own security we are fighting for. If we don't destroy the Taliban, we will see them planting bombs in Piccadilly Circus. Do I believe that? No. Regardless of their ideology, they're fighting to get us out of their country, not fighting to get into ours.

On 17 August the embattled UK Defence Secretary Bob Ainsworth (known as 'Bollocks Bob' to the troops) inadvertently confirmed what we all know anyway. The new Chief of the Army General Sir David Richards, who is reported to be 'close' to Karzai (12) had said that 'we would be in Afghanistan for the next 40 years'. But as British public opinion slowly but surely turns against the UK maintaining a presence in Afghanistan, Bob Ainsworth was so anxious to pooh-pooh the notion that we would be there for years, that he went the round of the TV and radio studios, including the Today programme. Unfortunately for him, he was up against John Humphries. No, no, not forty years, he protested, it will take two years to make progress. 'Only progress?' asked Humphries, 'no results?' And he pressed Mr Ainsworth on this point: when we went into Afghanistan, did we have *any* plans for what we would do after we had overthrown the Taliban, any plans at all for reconstruction and rebuilding? Answer came there none, and I thought sadly yet again of Iraq, while Mr Ainsworth dodged and gabbled.

And then, in his very last sentence, it fell out of his muddled, over-eager mouth. 'We are there,' he said emphatically, 'to protect our own vital interests.' *Interests*, not security. So that's it then. Gas pipelines reign supreme. Bugger democracy. And bugger our soldiers,

the Afghans, and the elections they've all died for.

Notes

1. *The Great Game for the Oil & Gas of the Caspian Region*, Christopher Bollyn, 26/09/01

2. *Is Enron Behind The War In Afghanistan?* Robert Lederman, 05/02/02

3. *Afghanistan, the CIA, bin Laden, and the Taliban* Phil Gasper, *International Socialist Review*, Nov-Dec 2001

4. *The U.S. military has made Afghanistan safe for opium production once again*, Dave Gibson, 14/04/09

5. *Opium crop haul just a hill of beans, admits MoD*, Jon Boone, Guardian 01/07/09

6. *Afghan election fraud is unearthed*, Ian Pannell BBC News 18 Aug 09

7. *US Copter Loses Ballot Boxes as Afghan Vote Count Moves Slowly Forward*, Jason Ditz, 27/08/09

8. *New Afghan 'poll frauds' emerge*, BBC News, 05/09/09

9. [**Tribal Leaders Say Karzai's Team Forged 23,900 Votes, Dexter Filkins, New York Times, 02/09/09**](#)

10. *More results in Afghan elections*, Chris Morris, BBC Today Programme, 05/09/09

11. *Karzai in 'explosive' row with U.S. special envoy over allegations of vote-rigging in Afghan election*, David Williams Daily Mail, 29/08/09

12. *Richards takes over as army chief with promise to focus on soldiers' welfare*, Michael White, Gaurdian 28/08/09

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