



Afghanistan Presidential Election 2004

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AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Hello, everyone. Thank you for doing this. It's a pleasure to talk with you. As you all know, we are at the end of the campaign season for the presidency here in Afghanistan. The campaign ended at 7:00 a.m. this morning here, and the Afghans are poised to vote on Saturday. This is a historic opportunity for the people of Afghanistan. Never before have they had the opportunity, both men and women, to vote for the president of Afghanistan, the leader of Afghanistan, in a secret ballot in a free and fair election, given the conditions in Afghanistan.

We have been talking to the candidates. By we, I mean myself and the members of my mission. And there are still possibilities of some people dropping out of the race in the coming 24 hours, but I think the likelihood of any coalition emerging of candidates, as has been speculated about in the course of the last couple of days, has disappeared.

The key thing is, obviously, security still. Because of the efforts of the Afghan National Army and police working together with the force of the coalition and ISAF, we have been able to limit the efforts that the opposition has been making to prevent the election from taking place, and they have failed in that effort. The election will take place on Saturday. And now I think they are still trying to find ways and means of disturbing or disrupting the election. A couple of hours ago, we got a call from ISAF that a couple of missiles were launched near Kabul. We don't know what damage it might have done, but it was near one of the military facilities that we have near Kabul, Camp Wilhouse.

And I anticipate that although the opportunities and timelines for doing something on the security front against this election has reduced because time has gone forward and we are less than 48 hours away from elections, but it could be that tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, the day after elections, and during the period when there is a counting of the votes, that the opponents of Afghanistan's progress will try to disrupt the process. I anticipate that a high percentage of those registered to vote will actually vote across Afghanistan, but it may vary from region to region depending on the security situation in those areas.

My view is that on election day there will be some disturbance, but it's not going to be significant to affect the credibility of the election. We'll have to see, but my own assessment at present is that of the 25,000 stations, or 5,000 or so election centers, the opponents of Afghanistan's progress are unlikely to be able to go after more than a few such centers.

With regard to the outcome of the election, at this point President Karzai is expecting and hoping that he will win in the first round and the opposition candidates are seeking to push this to a second round, and that's the strategies of the two sides and we will have to see. Currently, opinion polls and expectations of quite a few experts that I talk to is that the President is going to be ultimately the winner, likely in the first round but certainly as a result of the second round. But we will have to see actually what happens.

We are delighted that as the representatives of the United States here that we've had a role to play in bringing about circumstances in which the Afghan people, both men and women, have the opportunity to choose their leader. We are wishing the Afghan people all the best on election day. This is obviously a defining moment in Afghan history and an important event for this part of the world, and I expect that things will go relatively well given the conditions in this country. And I would like to stop here and take questions from you.

MR. DENIG: Good afternoon, Mr. Ambassador, and thank you very much for being willing to join with us this afternoon. We'd like to see if we have some questions from New York at this point. No? Then we'll start with some questions in English and then I think we'll have some questions in Dari in a few minutes.

So let's start right here with a question in English. Please, as usual, identify your name and news organization.

QUESTION: My name is Majeed Khan, I am the foreign correspondent for *The Frontier Post* based in Peshawar. I am asking the Ambassador, as you say, that there is some candidates is going to be dropped, like we heard about those (inaudible) some others (inaudible). So what's the U.S. intervene in this whole campaign and what's the structure of that mission that you described, so is it not the intervention in the interest of Afghanistan that they are forcing or they are telling people to be dropped?

Thank you.

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Well, first, I have talked about this before. We have not encouraged or coerced anyone to drop from the elections. They have had some 18 candidates running for President, some having some realistic prospects for getting elected and some not. It's not surprising that as you get close to the vote that some have dropped off, forming coalitions. That's not surprising, although still I think as of a few minutes ago 15 candidates for president are still in the race, so it's quite a large number.

There have been reports, and I am aware of discussions among some of the candidates who are opposed to President Karzai. They had tried to form some sort of a coalition to field a single candidate or fewer candidates than 14 against President Karzai in order to improve their odds against President Karzai.

So far, indications are it may be getting too late for such a coalition to be formed. A couple of candidates have dropped and have expressed their support for the President in the race. But we know the results of politicking, that is natural when you have so many candidates and you don't have the same processes as we do in the United States, the two main parties having their conventions and their nominees. Here, you know, anyone who got 10,000 signatures could run for president and quite a few people did. And as I said, there was an attempt on the part of the opponents to form a single block, or at least a majority or substantial numbers do so, against the President, and they have not succeeded in that effort so far.

QUESTION: My name is Murtaza Solangi. I work for Voice of America Urdu Service. My question is: How satisfied are you, Mr. Ambassador, with the role of Pakistan in this election process, especially in the light of Mr. Dostum's statement that Pakistan is meddling in the affairs of this election process?

Thank you.

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Thank you for that. Pakistan has played a positive role with regard to the registration of the Afghans who are still refugees in Pakistan. Over 700,000 Afghans have registered in Pakistan to participate in electing the leader.

When I was in New York during the General Assembly a few weeks ago, President Bush invited President Musharraf and President Karzai to a trilateral meeting and impressed upon President Musharraf the importance of a successful election in Afghanistan and urged him to do all that he could to make sure that Pakistani territory is not used to increase or create security problems for Afghanistan during this critical period.

The President of Pakistan committed himself to do everything he could to be helpful in this process, and we have seen some indications that Pakistan is trying harder to be helpful, and that's obviously welcomed.

QUESTION: Thank you. My name is Andrei Sitov, I'm with the Russian News Agency, TASS. I wanted to ask you, sir, you referred to the American election campaign, and as you certainly know, the Democrat candidates keep talking about this Tora Bora incident, where supposedly the Americans left the job to the locals, and as a result of that, the leaders of al-Qaida got away. I wonder, sir, if you could give us your picture of really happened in that episode.

And also, if you could talk a little bit about the opium production, which is the biggest problem for my country, which is Russia. Thank you.

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Thank you. I cannot speak about the second problem. I don't want to get involved in the campaign in the United States. I think the strategy that was pursued at that time was a strategy that was proposed by the military people, and I have not looked into the details of exactly what happened, what forces were deployed where, or whether Usama bin Laden was, in fact, dead or not. I was not here at that time, and did not have any responsibility, in terms of the tactics and strategies, to go after people who were in Tora Bora, and quite a few of them were killed and some captured.

With regard to the second question, yes, you are right. The narcotics production and trafficking is, I think, the single most serious problem that has not gotten better but, in fact, has gotten worse during the last three years. A lot of other things are going extremely well, well to not so bad in Afghanistan. The trajectory is positive.

But on the narcotics issue, the trajectory has been a negative one, and our British colleagues have had the lead on this effort with the Afghans to deal with the problem. We are thinking of being more helpful, in terms of the level of effort from us, and I hope other countries, including Russia -- as you said, they suffer from the consequences of this problem -- can contribute to an effort that must be broad, sustained, and serious to reverse this trend.

The things that are required, one is that we need to change the attitudes of the Afghan people towards this issue. It has to be regarded as negative, that it is risky for Afghanistan to be involved in this. It affects the Afghan society negatively, puts its potential development, in terms of a normal country with a democratic political system, at risk, because the drug traffickers could gain increasing influence on the political system. They have a negative effect on Afghanistan's environment. The labs that produce heroin could affect the water system of the country, it could produce addictions here.

So we need to change the attitudes of the people here by presenting to them the effects for Afghanistan of this problem.

In addition, we need to do a lot more on alternative livelihood. Alternative livelihood is an important effort. Farmers have to be able to support their families. In addition, there has to be a serious effort with regard to law enforcement. Those are involved in this have to be dealt with through the judicial process. They have to be incarcerated and punished.

The limited capabilities that exist has to be used intelligently to make examples of people. In addition, there has to be eradication, as well as interdiction efforts.

So it requires a comprehensive strategy, the sequence. It requires international cooperation, participation by Europeans and Russia, in particular, since they are being affected the most. But we are willing to play a more active role along with Great Britain and the Afghans to reverse this very negative trend.

QUESTION: Mr. Ambassador, this is Cesar Muñoz with EFE News Service. I know you have worked with Iraq before, and I wonder if you could -- if you see any lessons for Iraq of this electoral process in Afghanistan, and whether the elections there will be -- will have some kind of positive effect in Iraq. Thank you.

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: You're right that I used to do Iraq, but that's been a very long time since that time. Last time I dealt with Iraq was in April of last year, so that's quite a long time ago. I'm reluctant to comment on it or draw any lessons, other than that very important to have elections. Elections are part of the process of building a legitimate government that has broad support. In Afghanistan, the initial government, after the overthrow of the Taliban, was created by four groupings of Afghans, and those groupings were selected by the United Nations, and the Afghan people did not have a direct role in this election process.

Then we move to a broader, kind of, representative system to select the transitional government. There was Loya Jirga, or a grand assembly, and that was not also a system in which every Afghan citizen, men and women, participated. It was an indirect system of selection and wasn't a direct secret ballot that those who were registered to vote selected a leader now.

We have a situation now in which all eligible Afghans who have registered will participate. The president who will be elected through this process will have greater legitimacy than the two previous interim authority and transitional systems. The government will have a clear mandate from the people and this election process itself has been very helpful for Afghanistan, in my view, and in the process of nation-building in this country because candidates have traveled from one part to another part of the country.

They have had to listen to their compatriots from other regions, getting to know their problems, having to hire people from different areas, opening offices, building relationships with people from different regions, and I think the democratic process and the nation-building process and the state-building process have been reinforcing each other. So I regard that as very positive.

Of course, the security issues they have had have been a factor, and then the conditions that are current in Afghanistan, I think, given those limitations in mind, this has been a very positive experience. I think the candidates, by and large, have handled themselves well, and the Afghan people certainly have reacted extremely positively to this opportunity. We saw that most in the registration. We have seen it in the campaigns that have been followed or carried out by the different candidates.

MR. DENIG: New York, do you have a question?

MODERATOR: Yes, we do, Paul. Thank you.

QUESTION: Mr. Ambassador, my name is Neeme Raud. I'm from the Estonian newspaper, *Postimees*.

There have been discussion that this election is kind of hushed or rushed by the United States before the elections here to show that Afghanistan and then Iraq that the democracy-building is on track, but the elections will not be free or fair because there is statistics that many people even don't know how to vote.

How do you respond to this kind of criticism that this is a rushed election before the U.S. elections to show Americans that these processes which are not really

(inaudible) are in place?

Thank you.

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Thank you very much. The time-line for the election was selected in Bonn, when the Afghan interim authority, in the aftermath of the fall of the Taliban, was being put together, and this election is behind schedule a little bit in terms of the timelines envisaged by Bonn. The election should have taken place in June, several months ago, but because of the circumstances in the country, the preparation required, the international community here -- and this is the case of the elections represented by the United Nations, which has a key role in organizing this election -- decided that it should be delayed until the 9th of October for the election to take place.

The Afghans themselves in their discussions had issues to consider about the timing because it was the UN and the Afghans. During the constitutional Loya Jirga, there was a great deal of discussion on this issue among the delegates. A long delay from the time-line of Bonn -- let's say, a year or two -- there was a concern that the government will suffer from a crisis of legitimacy because it was perpetuating itself, and they didn't want to do that because at times in the past in Afghanistan the government in power has extended itself and it is that sort of thing, that event, that extension was a cause of conflict in the past. And President Karzai and his government didn't want to give a reason for conflict by extending itself too long. So they decided to extend the government's mandate for four or five months until October 9th, which they said was technically what they needed from a logistics point of view to have this election. I believe myself that the Afghan people know what they are doing and by very, very high margins. I think they know what this election is about, that they are selecting their leader and they're selecting their president.

They initially were a little concerned that whether this was going to be through a secret ballot. I think the voter education effort of the last several weeks has made that point clear and that this is going to be an election in which people in the privacy of the voting booth will choose their leader. And I believe that any judgment that Afghans are not ready for this process prejudices things.

People were saying Afghans aren't going to register to vote because they didn't see the importance of this. And in the face of dastardly attacks by the opponents of Afghanistan, the Afghan people came out in larger numbers and registered, and I think they will surprise us during the election day as well. I think they will do very well for themselves. We've had these discussions before historically when we have said some people are not ready for elections, and they have turned out that when people had the opportunity to choose their leaders, it's human nature that you want to have a voice in that selection process. When India was becoming independent, people were writing and saying, "Well, they are not really ready for independence." People were saying the Germans don't have the mentality for democracy, the Japanese, and so forth. I think the Afghan people know what this election is about and let's give them the benefit of the doubt and wait and see.

The American election has nothing to do with the timing of this thing. We have no direct role with regard to the timing of the election.

NEW YORK MODERATOR: If we may, New York has an additional question.

QUESTION: Hello, Mauro Suttora, from Italy.

Sir, you were a signatory in '98, of the manifesto by the Project for the New American Century, together with some -- for what was considered the manifesto of the neo-con, asking for restoration of American leadership, military might, and the spreading of democracy.

After six years, are you satisfied with the outcome? And do you consider Afghanistan as a blueprint for the future?

Thank you.

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: And thank you very much. I was a signatory to that document, which emphasized the unique situation in the world of American preeminence in the world, not only in terms of American power, militarily and economically, but also in terms of the relevance of American or democratic values around the world. And what we were arguing about at that time was how to maintain a situation to avoid a return to a bipolar system of a Cold War model or a multipolar system of powers balancing each other to maintain the peace, and in the process also, perhaps risking global war.

And we emphasized that the challenges that we faced in this new era are challenges of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, challenges of maintaining alliances among the centers of economic and political and military power -- Europe, the United States, and Asian power -- and at the same time, spreading the values that has made Europe, the United States, North America and Eastern Europe the zones of peace, prosperity and democracy incrementally to other parts of the world.

We were not thinking of Afghanistan at that time as the first place in which we would do that in this new era, but September 11th, as we all know, changed things in a dramatic way. And in confronting the threat of terror, we came to Afghanistan to liberate a country that was in the hands of extremists and terrorists. We have made enormous strides in terms of making progress here to improve the lives of the people of Afghanistan.

I think the registration, the election, the party registrations, the buildup of civil society, and the free press show that the values of democracy, the values of respecting human rights, men and women participating in the organization and development of society, the rule of law, these are values that are relevant to human beings everywhere and I have been heartened by the progress that Afghanistan has made, but we have a long way to go.

I say to my colleagues and friends that the journey of getting Afghanistan to stand on its own feet to be a successful country is a 10-mile journey. We are just finishing mile three. Nation-building, state-building, in societies like Afghanistan, which suffered from Soviet occupation, civil war, extremism and terror, was a country that was segmented, to put it together, to make it into a successful country is not a project for one or two or three years.

It will take time, it will take commitment, it will take effort, and the United States, certainly, President Bush, is committed to that effort and we understand what's at stake here. There is a struggle going on about a defining issue of our time. Terror and extremism and what happens in Afghanistan will be important in that struggle to shape this entire region from Pakistan to Morocco.

A lot is at stake here. That's why some people are opposing us. They're still fighting, in my view, ideologically, and in terms of the interest of the Afghan people, a losing battle, but they are still fighting. But ultimately, I think, we will succeed because the people of Afghanistan would like to succeed and because responsible countries like the United States and our European and Asian allies and others, would like Afghanistan to succeed.

QUESTION: Mr. Ambassador, Raghuraj Goyal, from Indian Globe and Asia Today.

First of all, sir, congratulations for the Afghan people on this first ever democratic election, and we hope that soon we will have a true democracy in the region.

First of all, Mr. Ambassador, what role India is playing in this election, and also if you can say, sir, as this election is concerned, where is Usama bin Laden and what role do you think he will play?

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Well, India has been a good partner with regard to Afghanistan's reconstruction. There are quite a number of projects that India is implementing here, and on elections I don't know of any direct Indian role with regard to the elections. This is obviously a UN-Afghan matter. Those of us from abroad wish the Afghans all the best with regard to the elections.

And with regard to Usama bin Laden, I wish I knew where he was. Of course, we're looking for him. We'll eventually find him. And my judgment is that he is not in Afghanistan now, and we have no indication that he is in Afghanistan.

Thank you.

QUESTION: T.V. Parasuram, Press Trust of India.

Could you describe the system of balloting there, and also the rules for the run-off? What is the system of balloting? Is it by -- how do Afghans know for which candidate they are voting? Is it by symbols, party symbols, and also how will they recognize that? And what are the rules for the run-off? Do the two candidates who get the most votes face each of them, or how does it happen?

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Thank you. If I understood the question, with regard to people being able to identify the candidates that they vote for, as you all know, there are quite a few Afghans and the majority are illiterate, and in order to deal with that situation the ballots have the pictures of each candidate and the symbol. Each candidate also selected a symbol.

President Karzai, for example, in recent days, in order to make sure people know who he is that who may not have seen him on television, since television is not available to everyone, they may have heard of his name, and they may have heard of his voice and if they want to vote for him, what he has done is to describe himself on the radio to the people in Afghanistan saying, you know, I wear this caracole, this sheepskin hat. I am skinny and I am number two, in terms of the ranking on the ballot.

And I think a lot of people have been impressed and they talk about it and every event and meeting that I go to about his efforts to make sure people know, to find him if you like easily, it's on the ballots.

With regard to the run-off, if no candidate gets more than 50 percent of the vote in the first round, then there will be a second round and the top two vote getters will face each other after the announcement of the results. And the results are expected to be announced within three weeks of the voting day.

QUESTION: Mr. Ambassador, good evening to you. I'm from the Pashto Section from the Voice of America.

President Karzai and you have frequently indicated that one of the major problems is -- in the election is the warlords in Afghanistan. How do you think you and the coalition and the Afghan forces plan to deal with this problem?

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Of course, there have been significant changes with regard to the issue of warlords in the course of the last several months since I have been here. Every major regional military leader, some of whom are called warlords, have either been removed from their area or they have other jobs, and there has been considerable progress in terms of cantoning heavy weapons that regional militia leaders have had. Fifty-seven percent of heavy weapons have been cantoned. In some areas, such as Kabul, for example, heavy weapons have been totally cantoned.

With regard to civilianizing militias, we have reached 20,000 figure. That's about, you know, more than, in my view, 35 percent of the forces on paper. It has been assumed that the militia forces are about 100,000. In reality, they are probably no more than 50,000.

So we've made considerable progress, and by the end of June of next year, there should be no militia forces anymore, you know. The process of taking weapons from people, civilianizing their forces, are very difficult processes. I sometimes say, in Afghanistan, we are trying to learn how to crawl, walk and run at the same time, doing so many things that in other countries, whether you look at the history of Europe or history of other parts of the world, have taken decades to accomplish, and we're trying to accomplish them in Afghanistan in a matter of years.

But progress is being made. Now, with regard to the elections and some of these militia leaders, there is concern, there is reason to be concerned that they may seek to intimidate the voters in Afghanistan. The way to deal with this is through an approach that everybody has come up with and supports: It is voters education, voter education so people know that in the ballot box, no matter what the militia leader has said, or intimidation or bribe, but when he or she goes to the ballot box, he and she will be alone there. No militia leader will be allowed to go in there, no militia soldier will be allowed to go there, and that the voter will be there alone with his or her conscience and the future of his country or her country. And I think people have initially were doubtful about this, and I think with the effort that has been made, people recognize and appreciate this, I think, and a *New York Times* piece a few days ago made this point extremely well.

Now, with regard to the intimidation, there is another thing that has also happened, which is that, besides international observers, that there will be a couple hundred of Afghans trained by the international folks of which there will be more than 2,000. There will be some 40,000 agents of various candidates observing the election stations, observing what's going on, what goes on in these stations, and I think that the presence of these observers and agents and advisors will also be a factor to check the potential for intimidation.

MODERATOR IN KABUL: New York and Washington, the Ambassador has time for one more question.

QUESTION: Sir, I'm Khalil from Associated Press of Pakistan. Mr. Ambassador, we have gotten all these sides, you know, covered, in my opinion, but one thing I just want for my story purpose. Was the climate there, you know, and about the color, you know, how the sentiments of the people are, you know, since it is the first election, and they should be -- naturally, they will be jubilant, but as to what the atmosphere is.

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Well, from all that I hear, and I do travel around and meet with people, there is a lot of excitement in the air. I mean, it's unbelievable the amount of time that is spent on the elections on Afghan radios, in newspapers, in discussions and meetings. I think there are posters everywhere. It's an exciting time for Afghanistan and for the people of Afghanistan.

These people have suffered a great deal. They have suffered unspeakable things during the Soviet occupation, during the vicious civil war, during the tyranny of the backward Taliban and the terrorist allies of theirs. And now, they have an opportunity to make some choices about their future. These terrible experiences that they have suffered have made them very wise.

I even joke with President Karzai that in other parts of the world, people say, "Well, people should follow leaders because leaders are more educated, they are more experienced, they are more worldly." But as I travel around Afghanistan, the people of Afghanistan have become wise. They want security. They want weapons collected. They want militias disarmed. They want a single national army. They want a national police. They want rule of law. They want a strong relationship with the international community. They fear abandonment by the United States and the international community. They are grateful for the help that they are receiving. And they want to have a say in the selection of their leaders. In other words, they want to move towards a democratic order.

They also have learned that they need to compromise, that they need to be able to live with people who are different than they are, based on language, ethnicity or a sect of religion, because of the civil war period where lack of tolerance led them in a very undesirable war situation.

So I think that this is an important milestone for the people of Afghanistan. They understand that. And I think they have done very well for themselves during the registration period. I have said to them I am very proud of them in the way that they have reacted to the situation, and they are going to do very well during the election now.

As I said before, there is a huge struggle going on for the future of this country, for the future of this region. There are people who do not want Afghanistan to succeed. The Afghans and the responsible countries that are here to help them are moving forward. I am optimistic about the future of this country because of the people of Afghanistan and because of the commitment of the key countries in the world to the future of Afghanistan.

We all know that a failed Afghanistan is a recipe for problems, for threats, for risks. We saw that in the United States on September 11th. We made the mistake in the 1990's to abandon Afghanistan after we worked together with the Afghan people to defeat the Soviet Union here. We will not make that mistake again. We should not make that mistake again. So the Afghan people, I think, are ready for the next test that they will face on Saturday, choosing their leader, and I am optimistic that they will do very well.

Thank you very much. I appreciate your time.

MR. DENIG: Mr. Ambassador, Radio Free Europe has one question in Dari. Would you have just two minutes for that?

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Sure.

QUESTION: Thank you. (In Dari.)

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: (In Dari.)

MODERATOR IN KABUL: Thank you, again, everyone in New York and D.C.

MR. DENIG: Mr. Ambassador, thank you very much for this dialogue. We look forward to future opportunities.

AMBASSADOR KHALILZAD: Thank you. Thank you very much. God bless all of you. Thank you.

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