

## The First Democratic Elections in Afghanistan: A Report by the Bipartisan Observer Team

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**MR. DENIG:** Welcome to the Washington Foreign Press Center. We are very pleased, after the historic first democratic election of a President of Afghanistan last Saturday to be able to present a briefing from observers who were there in country to witness this event. Our briefers are Bernard Aronson, member of the Board of Directors of the National Democratic Institute; Paul Behrends, a Partner at the Alexander Strategy Group; and Judy Van Rest, Executive Vice President of the International Republican Institute. After opening remarks, they will be glad to take your questions.

**MR. ARONSON:** During our time in Kabul, we were able to obtain a good, first-hand view of the election process and machinery. We also met prior to Election Day with virtually all of the opposition candidates. We met with President Karzai; we met with the head of UNAMA, Jean Arnault. We met with the head of the JEMB Secretariat to try to get a sense of preparations that had gone into the election. And we also met with a group of women civic leaders and journalists, Afghan women.

I think what impressed us about Election Day was that it was extremely orderly. There was a large turnout. Afghans clearly were very eager to vote, despite the threats that had gone on for many months by the Taliban that they would somehow use violence to disrupt the process.

We witnessed some of the technical problems that received, I think, more attention than they deserved. I would just note that I was Assistant Secretary of State when we held the first elections in Nicaragua. The exact same problem with the ink took place then. The elections dealt with that. They went forward and it was a legitimate election and it made a huge, historic change in that country's politics.

What impressed us about the technical problems -- primarily the ink, which did not occur in every polling place by any means, really only in a minority of polling places -- was that you had trained election officials who were on top of the problem that contacted UNAMA, contacted others and resolved the problems.

In one polling place, there was a suspension of voting for about an hour and three-quarters. We came back to that polling place. Most of the voters stayed in line. A few said they went home for lunch and then returned. But the voting in that polling place was quite large. So I think that the problems received more headlines than, frankly, the process, and I think that's a mistake because I think the process is what is most important.

We saw a handful, less than a handful of instances where what appeared to be underage Afghans came with registration cards, and again, in all cases the electoral officials, you know, resolved that usually by indicating that the voter couldn't vote because they were clearly not 18 years of age. But literally that was, I think, two instances.

In every polling place there were not only trained electoral officials, but there were also candidate representatives who were credentialed, who had the right to oversee the process. There were representatives of Afghan civic and other groups. In no instance did any voter indicate that there was any coercion, intimidation, pressure or assistance from any of the candidate observers, and we witnessed none.

We thought that the process for securing the ballot boxes, which we witnessed at the close of the polls, was a good one and we watched that happen. So, from our point of view, for a country that has gone through 25 years of extremely destructive warfare and civil strife and combat and division, to conduct an election like this under threat of violence from the Taliban and to carry it out so well, which included, as you know, a sizeable vote among refugees in Pakistan and Iran and a sizeable turnout of women, we think it's an historic and tremendously hopeful achievement.

And I think it's worth pointing out two other things, and then I'll stop. One, this was not a one-off event. This was the latest in a series of steps that Afghanistan has taken since the liberation from the Taliban that included the Bonn Agreement, included two Loya Jirgas, that included the creation of a Transitional Governmental Authority, the promulgation of a constitution that both proclaims Afghanistan an Islamic republic and also enshrines the political rights of women, which is an extremely important achievement.

And the campaign itself, I think, did not receive as much attention as it should, but initially, 18 candidates ran for president, spanning the political spectrum from Islamic traditionalists to secular progressives, including Afghanistan's first female candidate. They all had equal access and free access to radio and TV. In that country, radio is far more important, but they had access to both to broadcast their messages.

The major candidates carefully balanced their tickets with vice presidential candidates from different ethnic groups, which is an important and hopeful sign in a country where ethnic and tribal divisions are usually determined in politics.

And despite security limitations, which we're all aware of, there were campaign rallies and events, and Jean Arnault from the UN told us that in the final three weeks of the campaign 100,000 Afghans attended campaign events and rallies. So there was an open, genuine, democratic campaign process. And candidates, for the first time in Afghanistan's history, campaigned beyond their own tribe or ethnic group, beyond their own region, to a newly empowered national electorate, which is a sea change, an historic change, and extremely important change in that country.

And even the controversy over the ink, I think, is instructive of the fact that there is a new democratic politics in that country because on Election Day, the opposition candidates all vowed that they were going to walk away from the process and de-legitimize the elections unless a new election was held. That was their posture at 2 o'clock in the afternoon. When they got the response of the voters, which was universally "No, that's not acceptable," the voters felt that the election was legitimate and, in fact, the poll, the survey of more than 17,000 voters that IRI commissioned shows that 97 percent of the voters believe that even despite technical problems of the

elections that they would not affect the results. And 82 percent of those polled said the elections are free and fair, and another 12 percent said they're good enough. So, frankly, it's probably higher numbers than we will get in our own election.

But once the opposition candidates heard from the voters, they all backpedaled and said, "Well, we'll organize an independent inquiry." And I think that Kanuni's statement, Yunus Kanuni, who was President Karzai's chief rival, was very interesting when he reversed position and said he'd accept the election. He said, "I want to prove to the people of Afghanistan that the national interest is my interest." That's the statement of a democratic politician with an eye on his future, not the candidate of the warlords, which everybody expected him to be.

So I think that the election was far more successful and important than it's understood to be and that we have a historic opportunity to help Afghans consolidate a tolerant, pluralist, democratic society in the heart of the Muslim world. And that achievement, if it was realized, would be a huge gravitational pull on Iran and Pakistan as they carry out their own democratic processes in which we have an enormous stake and which are extremely important for the stability of Central Asia and the security of the West. It would be a good counterweight to the politics of Afghanistan's northern neighbors, particularly Uzbekistan, which had tried to use the war on terror as a pretext for continued internal repression.

And I think if Afghans are able to overcome 25 years of internal ethnic and tribal division and warfare to create a new national political identity, that would be an extremely important model for Iraqis as they begin their own democratic processes.

So I think the stakes in the success of this are very high. Trends are good but the challenges are huge as well. And this is a test of the international community and the democratic community and the United States whether we have the vision to reengage and recommit and increase our commitment to Afghanistan because there's huge gaps in security in disarming militias, in providing effective counternarcotics and alternative development and promoting development. And if we can do that -- and the jury is out -- I think at this stage in the struggle for Muslims political identity, this could be the equivalent of Lech Walesa and Solidarity taking power in Poland was in the Cold War, only far earlier in the struggle.

So hopefully, frankly, the undue press attention on the technical glitches, which I think sent a very unfortunate signal to most uninformed viewers, will not cause us to miss the historic achievement that just took place in Afghanistan and that we'll seize this opportunity, but that's going to be set of by people higher than my pay grade these days.

**MR. DENIG:** Thank you very much, Mr. Aronson. We'll turn now to Mr. Paul Behrends, who is a partner with the Alexander Strategy Group.

**MR. BEHRENDIS:** Thank you, Paul, and thank you, Bernie, for that excellent statement. The only problem that I observed with your statement is that I didn't make it. (Laughter.)

**MR. ARONSON:** You wrote it for me and I just said it. (Laughter)

**MR. BEHRENDIS:** You've really captured the sense of what we experienced over there very well, and I want to thank you and Rich Williamson for their leadership on the trip, thank the International Republican Institute and the Foreign Press Center for helping us to share our experience there.

It's hard to find the adjectives to put in front of the word "accomplishment" when you think of what has happened in Afghanistan over the last couple of days in terms of this election. Clearly, it's not over yet. They're still counting the ballots. So that's an important part of the process and hopefully the, you know, when that process is done it will have been done as well as the day of the election that we observed.

And contrary to all kind of reports leading up to the election, there was no intimidation, and we were very much on the lookout for signs of intimidation. I didn't see it. And I don't know that any of my colleagues saw it to any degree that created concerns for them. There was an absence of violence. We are very much aware of the event that had happened before the election, the threats against particular candidates, the rocket attacks, the interception of vehicles with enormous amounts of explosives on it. But on election day people came out by the hundreds at each one of these polling sites and they were not deterred. That was very inspiring.

What we saw was an orderly process: We saw uniformed election volunteers who knew what their jobs were, were at their positions on time; the voters showed up, stood in lines, and they were in an orderly way; there was appropriate security; nobody was prohibited from having access to the polls; people had proper registration cards; and the process went forward.

The issue of the ink was identified and people knew how to ask questions, move it up the chain of command, and within a couple of hours the issue had been addressed from our perspective, from what we were able to observe in Kabul. And I think there's an important caveat just to mention. They locked down the airport on Kabul on the day of the election so we couldn't send people outside the city.

So, it was a historic accomplishment. I think what happened -- and this is just personal analysis -- is that this cycle of violence, this country had kind of been spiraling down, has stopped on the achievement of this election. And if I was a businessman, I'd say that the feasibility -- the feasibility study has come back and it's a good project, let's, now let's start investing in this. Let's start, not saying that this election has happened, therefore we can move on to other things. Now is the time to consolidate our success and to help these people move forward.

So, in moving forward, I think the next challenge would be the parliamentary elections in April, dealing with these huge narcotics problems and creating economic opportunity for the people of Afghanistan.

Let me just close by saying that after 9/11, or really, after the rise of the Taliban in the mid-'90s, people in Washington became more sensitized to the minorities in Afghanistan. Prior to the rise of the Taliban, most people's primary linkages had been with Pashtuns and with Tajiks. But there was not a large degree of awareness about Uzbeks and Hazaras and Turkoman and other minorities and the different groups of Tajiks.

After 9/11, people in Washington became very aware of these other groups and played a key role in how we dealt with the Taliban in Afghanistan. And people understand that Afghanistan is a country of minorities. And I am very much hopeful, along the line that Bernie was expressing, that those divisions will be mended in some way by this election, by this hope for democracy; that people are able to work over those esoteric, ethnic boundaries and work on common principles and common values and a common, you know, vision of the future. And it's hard to underestimate that.

Something has gone terribly right in Afghanistan, and I don't know that people really have been able to absorb it yet. I don't know if it's sunk in. You know, I've been saying for a couple of months that if we're able to have the Olympics and able to have our national conventions in New York and Boston, if we're able to have the UN General Assembly and we're able to have the Afghan election and our election without major terrorist strikes, something's gone right. That's such a huge story. So I think it would be a valuable service to your readers and to the Afghan people to make sure that they know about what happened in Afghanistan and how much of a success it was.

Thank you.

**MR. DENIG:** Thank you very much, Mr. Behrends. We'll now turn to Judy Van Rest of the International Republican Institute.

**MS. VAN REST:** Thank you. My two colleagues have covered much of the points that I wanted to make, but let me add a few others. First, our delegation was a bipartisan one. The collective experience of the delegation was, folks had observed multiple elections in 24 countries. This was my ninth observer mission, and I must say observing this election I found to be the most inspiring. I've observed elections in Russia and Ukraine, Mongolia, Belarus, Azerbaijan.

The reason I say that is that the enthusiasm of the voters was really quite impressive. As mentioned before, they stood in line, sometimes numbering up to a hundred or more. In cases of the polling sites where there were problems with the ink, for example, some of them closed for two to three hours, and yet Afghans remained in line until the polling sites reopened and they were able to cast their votes.

I was particularly struck by the participation of women in this election. 41 percent of women registered to vote. They came out in large numbers and I was able to witness them voting in their separate polling sites and great enthusiasm. They were extremely happy and several of them said to me and my colleague, Lena Auerbach, that they were very happy for their country and that this was a great day for their nation and the future of their children, so I think that that's another reason to take heart by the election. I think it's a very, very good first start. The other thing that I'd like to point out is that Afghan women are beginning to participate in the political activity already. We saw one woman as a presidential candidate. Three women were vice presidential candidates. And so I think that's an indication that Afghan women, in spite of years of oppression, are willing to step up and take a very active role in the future of their country.

**MR. DENIG:** Excellent. Thank you very much.

We'd like to open it up to questions, now. I wonder if I could just maybe ask a question of clarification. Were 41 percent of the registered people women or 41 percent of women registered to vote?

**MS. VAN REST:** 41 percent of voters registered were women.

**MR. DENIG:** Very good.

**MR. ARONSON:** Nobody knows how many Afghani women there really are in the country.

**MR. DENIG:** Okay, very good.

All right. Who would like to have the first question?

**MR. ARONSON:** If Scott could give just a minute on the survey for the (inaudible)?

**MR. DENIG:** Sure. Scott, why don't you introduce yourself.

**MR. MASTIC:** Sure. I'm Scott Mastic. I'm IRI's Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa. IRI, in addition to the Election Day monitoring team that we had there, did an Election Day public opinion poll. It included a sample of over 17,000 respondents from 26 provinces around the country and the distribution was national in scope.

We had approximately 450 surveyors in the field for the poll, 177 different teams, male/female teams. And the purpose of the poll was really just to provide a measure to lend increased confidence in the process and then to, if necessary, provide a check on the outcome of the process.

We, at this time, have preliminary findings of the poll available and I think they've been circulated widely in the press. They're showing a strong mandate for the lead vote-getter and, as Mr. Aronson was saying, a high confidence in the process among Afghans, and I think reflect a positive attitude toward the process itself and the future of the country.

**MR. DENIG:** Very good. Thank you very much. Who would like to ask the first question? Okay, Associated Press.

**QUESTION:** Harry Dunphy, AP International. The separate polling places for women, do you think that's going to be a permanent feature, or is that going to evolve over time and be done away with?

**MS. VAN REST:** Well, I'm not sure I know. I think we'll have to wait and see. I don't know. It probably has a lot to do with the culture of the country and the future decisions made about elections.

**MR. ARONSON:** You know, the politics of the south in this country changed fundamentally once African Americans had the right to vote after the Voting Rights Act and they had the ability to hold their elected leaders accountable. Giving women the vote in Afghanistan will do the same thing, so at least they have the political mechanisms to address that. But I think it's hardly a burning issue in the country. It's a very traditionally devout Islamic country, and I suspect that if you asked Afghan women what are their priorities, having the same polling places as men would not rank very high. There are lots of other issues that are very important in women's rights in that country that have to be addressed, but I suspect that one isn't number one, two, three, four, or five in most Afghans' minds.

**MS. VAN REST:** And I think they're most interested in being able to take part and running for office and taking on leadership roles in their communities.

**MR. BEHREND:** I would just add that each one of the polling stations had a supervisor, and oftentimes it was a woman who was in charge of the overall procedure for both men and women. And there were women candidates (inaudible) men's polling places (inaudible) representatives (inaudible).

**MR. DENIG:** Okay, let's go to ANSA, the Italian News Agency.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, my name is Gianluca Iazzolino of ANSA.

Well, I'd like to ask you if you have information on the condition of the voter in the refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan. And if I can, I'll ask a second question. I do not (inaudible) the voter for the candidate of the same ethnic group, so are you saying for this election that nobody is being a preferential ethnic candidate?

**MR. MASTIC:** Actually, I'm (inaudible) to that question, I think. As the team has mentioned, the delegation itself was confined to Kabul for Election Day. However, our poll did include results from Peshawar. We were not in Iran, but did include results from Peshawar.

In the very near future we're going to be able to do some more concrete data on the specific sort of ethnic group breakdown, but just in sort of the preliminary sense, from the results that we see, there is some distinction in whether Afghans deem the process as free and fair, based on ethnic groups.

There's lower confidence among Uzbeks polled. President Karzai seemed to have higher levels of support among Pashtuns and Tajiks; however, by and large, the sort of overwhelming mandate for the election process itself with 97 percent saying that any problems on election day didn't affect the outcome, and that 82 percent thought that the election process was free and fair, I think speaks across ethnic lines, really.

**MR. ARONSON:** Okay, why don't you give the percentages of the Pashtun and others for Karzai and Kanuni, because they -- or at least Karzai, because it shows that even though he didn't get all the Pashtun votes, he got a sizeable --

**MR. MASTIC:** Sure --

**MR. ARONSON:** - plurality, if not majority, but plurality of some of the other groups.

**MR. MASTIC:** Sure. According to figures that we have, and this is based on the 17,000-sample, Karzai received support from 86 percent of Pashtuns sampled, 40 percent of Tajiks, 16 percent of Uzbeks and 21 percent of Hazaras. Kanuni, on the other hand, received far lower levels of support from Pashtuns, only 5 percent, but 34 percent from Tajiks, 9 of Uzbeks, and 5 percent from Hazaras.

**MR. DENIG:** Can you repeat those figures, a little more slowly?

**MR. MASTIC:** Sure. Karzai: Pashtuns, 86 percent; Tajiks, 40 percent; Uzbeks, 16 percent; and Hazaras 21 percent. Kanuni: Pashtuns 5 percent; Tajiks 34 percent; Uzbeks 9 percent; Hazaras 5 percent.

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

**NEW YORK:** No, not at this time.

**MR. DENIG:** Okay.

Could I just as a question of the group? Were you there only as observers, or did you find yourself required to provide any advice to the Afghan election workers, poll workers? Or were they handling everything just fine and professionally on their own?

**MS. VAN REST:** We were only there as observers.

**MR. DENIG:** Just observers. Okay. No more questions? Then thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen.



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