

Afghanistan's crucial elections

► *Being the fifth largest aid donor to Afghanistan, India's interest would be best served if the election process there passes off smoothly with no major legitimacy disputes.*

Bhaskar Balakrishnan

The Presidential and Provincial elections in Afghanistan, held on August 20, were conducted relatively peacefully despite Taliban efforts to sabotage them. This in itself is a great achievement, despite the reports about some flaws in the election process.

Voter turnout estimated at 45 per cent was much lower than the 70 per cent recorded for the October 2004 elections. The turnout varied considerably across the regions of the country. Taliban influence, which is stronger in the Pashtun areas, may have accounted for low turnout in these areas. The Taliban has made intensive efforts to stop the elections, including reported atrocities such as cutting off the fingers of some who dared to vote. The Taliban would like to take Afghanistan back to its concept of a tribal form of rule, with no accountability or redress.

Complaints of bogus registration and multiple voter registration cards marred the election. However, nobody expected a perfect election, given the difficult security situation, and the limited capacity of the Afghan state machinery. But the fact that the election took place, albeit with some reports of violence and intimidation, would be a shot in the arm for Afghan democracy, and a setback to the Taliban on the political front.

COMPLEX POLITY

Afghanistan's highly complex polity results in complicated electoral calculations. The 28-million-population consists of Pashtuns (41 per cent), Tajiks (38 per cent), Hazaras (10 per cent), Uzbeks (6 per cent), Turkmens (2 per cent) and other groups.

The languages spoken are Dari, Pashto, Uzbek, Turkmen and others. Approximately 77 per cent are Sunni Muslims and 23 per cent are Shias. Added to this volatile cocktail are poor social indicators such as low literacy rate (28 per cent), low female literacy (13 per cent), high infant mortality (165), etc. which illustrate the severe challenges of development facing the country.

Opinion polls, which are not reliable, indicated that President Karzai, seeking re-election, would get around 44 per cent of the votes, ahead of Dr Abdullah Abdullah, who is expected to get around 26 per cent, and Mr Ashraf Ghani (6 per cent). It's too early to tell if the election will go into a second round between the two leading candidates.

Mr Karzai, a Pashtun and an independent candidate, has sought to broaden his support by choosing as first Vice-President, a Tajik, Mr Mohammad Qasim Fahim, a controversial figure, and as Second Vice-President, a Hazara, Mr Karim Khalili.

Mr Karzai's main challenger, Dr Abdullah Abdullah, the former Foreign Minister, is backed by the United National Front. Dr Abdullah is a doctor and has a Pashtun father and a Tajik mother. He has selected Mr Humayun Shah Asefi, a relative of the late King Zahir Shah, as his First Vice-President, and Mr Cheraghali Cheragh as his Second Vice-President. These two are relative lightweights and not well known. Ten other candidates, including a woman, are in the fray.

Though Dr Abdullah has run a vigorous campaign in recent weeks, closing the gap to some extent, Mr Karzai's success in enlisting Mr Qasim Fahim, has made a dent into the Tajik vote bank. However, Taliban efforts to prevent voting may affect Mr Karzai's votes from the Pashtun areas.

The third candidate, Mr Ashraf Ghani, a Pashtun and former Finance Minister, is a strong critic of Mr Karzai, and may cut into Mr Karzai's Pashtun votes.

The two leading candidates are well inclined towards India and would be in favour of building stronger relations with New Delhi. What matters to India is not so much who emerges the winner, but that the election should take place and a new government

formed through a democratic process. The choice of winner, or the reports that if Mr Karzai wins he might offer Dr Abdullah an important position are internal matters for the Afghan people. Thus, India's interest would be best served if the election process passes off smoothly with no major legitimacy disputes. India has no problems working with whatever leadership the Afghan people choose democratically for themselves.

On the other hand, having failed to disrupt the elections, the Taliban would naturally like to fan the flames of election dispute and discord, and thereby discredit the elections. Thus it would be important for countries with major stakes in Afghan democracy to try and ensure that the election process, imperfect as it might be, does not get derailed.

INDIA RELATIONS

India has a big stake in Afghanistan, having already provided around \$750 million in its development, making it the biggest regional provider of development assistance.

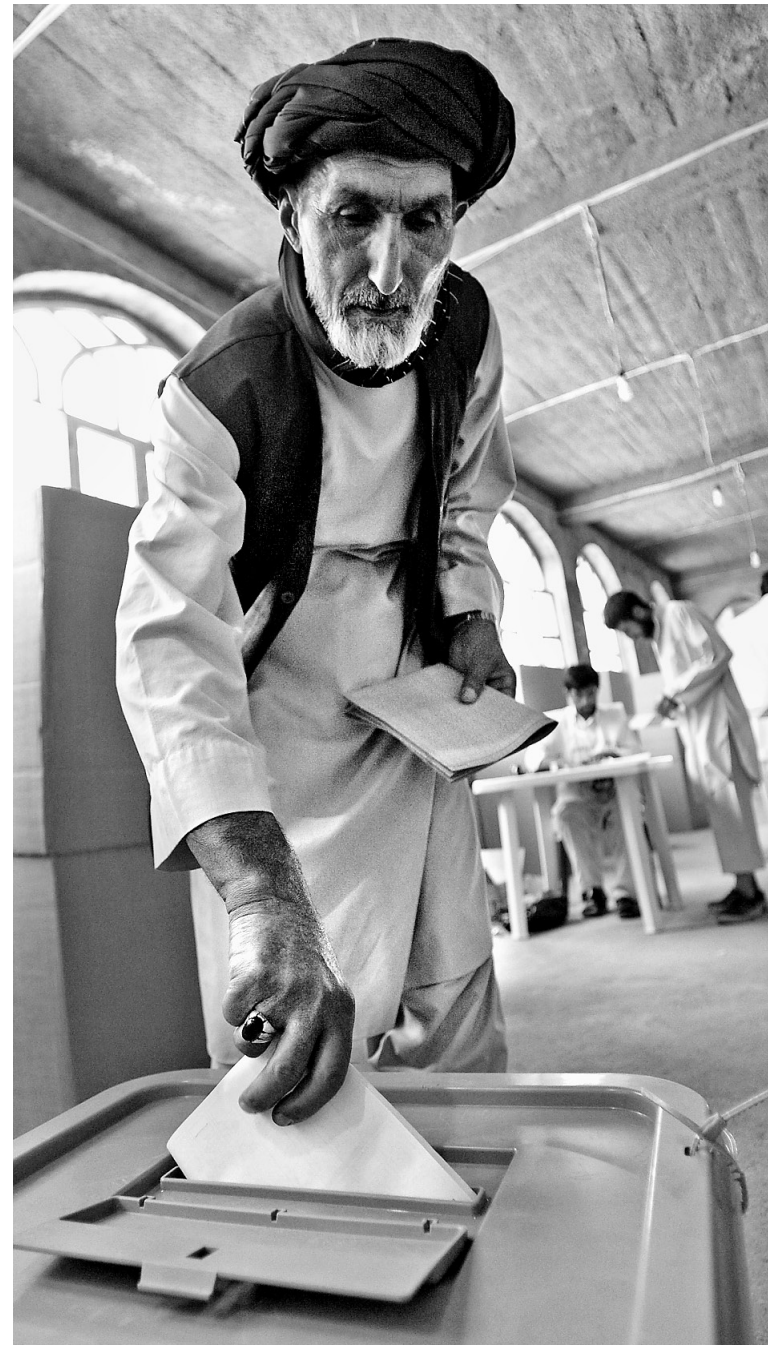
The \$1.2-billion pledged further by India includes projects both vital to Afghanistan's economy, such as a completed road link to Iran's border, and a new parliament building in Kabul and training for Afghan officials. India's aid has elevated it to Afghanistan's top tier of donors.

In terms of pledged donations through 2013, India now ranks fifth behind the US, the UK, Japan and Canada, according to the Afghanistan government. In contrast, China's aid since 2002 has been \$170 million.

The success of the election is a critical step in building a democratic, strong and capable Afghan state, an essential requirement for peace, progress and stability in the region. Failure in the elections would greatly embolden the Taliban-Al Qaeda combine, with negative fallout in Pakistan.

Without a sound Afghan state it would not be possible to build a strong Afghan National Army and police forces to eventually take over security responsibility from the ISAF.

Security is critical to move ahead with nation-building and development, something which has been sadly neglect-



Afghanistan's highly complex polity results in complicated electoral calculations. — Reuters

ed during the Bush administration, leading to draining away of political support for the US-led operations.

WORRYING SIGNS

Meanwhile, the US' Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman, Mr Mike Mullen, told media that the situation in Afghanistan has become more serious and is deteriorating, and the Taliban has become more sophisticated in its attacks. At the same time, opinion polls showed sharply declining US popular support for the war, with 51 per cent saying the war was not worth pursuing. NATO member-states are also

showing increasing war weariness.

The spread of the Taliban-al Qaeda into Pakistan has destabilised that country and presented the US-led coalition with a severe challenge.

Seen in this context, Indian policymakers would need to follow closely the progress of the elections and the formation of a new government in Afghanistan, and be ready to react in case electoral disputes threaten to erupt into violence and chaos.

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