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Karzai must not get away with this fraud

Salvaging something from the Afghan presidential election is going to require a political big push from the allies who help to prop up Afghanistan's government, even if they just try to see the electoral process to its logical conclusion.

Electoral fraud was not spontaneous, anarchic or inevitable. It was planned and systematic, with official collusion. The Election Commission (IEC), despite being advised to hold back on announcements, has released provisional results giving Karzai a slim majority. But analysts who have been through the figures have concluded that this majority is due to fraudulently cast ballots. An Election Complaints Commission (ECC) is scrutinizing results and considering complaints. The main challenger is sitting quiet for the moment. But instability is feared in case the IEC tries to push through a tainted result.

The electoral process of course is not over. The ECC has received enough complaints to strip Karzai of his majority and trigger a second round. If everyone now plays it by the rules, there will have to be a second round.

Going ahead with a second round of polling, after it is announced that the leading candidate got less than 50% is a viable option for which there is contingency planning. It is doable in terms of security. Politically there is something to be said for it. Two candidates are effectively forced to construct cross-ethnic coalitions. Skeptics, who have argued that a second round in Afghanistan would divisively pit northern Tajiks against southern Pashtuns, have fundamentally failed to comprehend the positive developments in Afghan politics. To his credit, Karzai knows that the Pashtun vote bloc alone is not enough to win an election and therefore wooed Hazara, Uzbek and Tajik allies. The contender, Dr. Abdullah, also knows that to win, he has to style himself as a national leader, building his own cross-ethnic alliance and trying to appeal to both "reformist" and "warlord" voter blocs. This is politics. The candidate who does the best job of constructing his cross-ethnic alliance can claim legitimacy.

Some in the international community would rather focus on counter-insurgency than elections. The trouble is that you cannot run a counter-insurgency without a legitimate government. The government needs a new mandate. Alternative ways of mandating a government, whether by Loya Jirga or international conference, might be logistically easier, but are politically much more difficult to get agreement on.

There have to be strong guarantees of no repetition of the August 20 fraud. Technically running a reasonably clean election in Afghanistan is possible. But this is where the US, UN and allies would have to invest their political effort in delivering concrete measures. High on the allies' shopping list with Karzai should be the appointment of a credible national figure, as IEC chairman, who is acceptable to both candidates and to the leadership of parliament. A caretaker administration, as per practice in Bangladesh, would be even better, but difficult to get agreement on. As a fall back, a joint oversight commission, to check that provincial and district administrations and security forces

observe impartiality, could help. Some action has to be taken against those responsible for the conspiracy in the first round, preferably targeting senior rather than junior conspirators. And in the run up to a second round, the UN should be required to certify whether the IEC has implemented the required fraud control measures.

Another set of critics have argued that no possible outcome of a second round could justify the effort involved in holding it. They argue that an Abdullah victory would be a disaster because he is unacceptable to Pashtuns. They are wrong because to assemble a winning coalition Abdullah would have to re-profile himself as a national leader and would have a better claim to rule in the south than any number of stuffed ballot boxes will give. These critics argue a Karzai victory, might just as well be accepted from the first round if the ECC could be persuaded to turn a blind eye to some of the fraudulent ballots. The more serious question is whether a Karzai elected on a second round would be any better at running Afghanistan than a Karzai elected on the first round. Legitimacy does matter. If Karzai claims victory on the basis of the stuffed boxes of the first round, it will only be possible because the western powers choose to turn a blind eye to fraud. If Karzai wins on the second round he will have been elected by the Afghan people in a fair contest. Some worry that thwarting Karzai's plans to win in one round would spoil the relationship with him. But turning a blind eye to the subversion of the election would so reduce western credibility as to spoil many relationships, not just that with Karzai

If anyone considers a second round the best way out, they will have to keep an eye on the political game of President Karzai. What if he decides to use tactical play to avert a second round? What if he creates facts-on-the-ground, by getting the IEC to announce final results regardless of ECC proceedings, or otherwise sidelines or cows the ECC? International actors have long behaved as if oblivious of the presidential Machiavellian repertoire. The IEC's ditching of its own guidelines to include results which should have been quarantined smacks of exactly such tactical play. Friends of the president are already promoting the idea that the only resistance to declaring Karzai elected is coming from the foreigners. The issue comes down to one of US leverage. All those in the Afghan government know that that they are financially and militarily dependent on US, support. If the US plays hard ball, behind the scenes, it has sufficient leverage to persuade Karzai to accept the popular verdict.

There is no easy or attractive option in Afghanistan now. The trouble is that a precipitate western withdrawal would be even more costly both for Afghanistan and the international community. This is why the least bad option is to see the electoral process through to its logical conclusion of a second round, backed up with strong diplomatic intervention to pre-empt a finesse. An Afghan president elected with a degree of legitimacy can then get on with a minimal process of state-building, reconciliation and creating the conditions for the withdrawal of western troops.

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