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Corrupt election campaign unfolds in US-occupied Afghanistan

by James Cogan
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Amid the chorus of denunciations in US and European ruling circles over the alleged theft of the Iranian elections, the Obama administration and its NATO allies are presiding over an election campaign in Afghanistan that is as corrupt as it is illegitimate.

The campaign for the August 20 presidential election officially began last month with 41 registered candidates, but it is little more than political theatre. The result has effectively been decided by previous US policy, sordid factional deals between a number of Afghan powerbrokers and an electoral system that facilitates vote rigging and voter intimidation.

The government created by the US invasion was based on giving control over various regions of the country to the ethnic Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara and Pashtun warlords who collaborated with the overthrow of the Taliban. Hamid Karzai, a representative of the pro-monarchist Popalzai branch of the Pashtun Durrani tribe, was installed as a figurehead president in 2002. Real authority, however, has been exercised by the US and NATO forces and the regional powerbrokers.

The result has been what US intelligence agencies described last year as “rampant corruption”. David Davis, a conservative British politician, observed after a fact-finding tour to Afghanistan that the country “appears to have been run for the financial benefit of 20 families... who are old-time warlords and faction leaders responsible for past atrocities”.

Ministers, governors and military commanders sell contracts and positions to the highest bidder. Police and public servants openly demand pay-offs and bribes. Numerous figures within the state apparatus are believed to be involved in Afghanistan’s vast illegal trade in opium and heroin, including Karzai’s brother, who controls areas of Kandahar province. Large amounts of international aid and so-called reconstruction funds have vanished into the pockets of government officials and local tribal leaders.

As the war dragged on and the consensus emerged during last year’s US elections that more American troops would have to be sent, there were indications that US policymakers were considering installing a more authoritative figure than Karzai as the head of their puppet regime.

Despite faithfully serving US interests, the Afghan president had at times angered the US military by mildly criticising the slaughter of civilians with air strikes and other operations. More importantly, he had not emerged as a respected figure among any significant section of the Afghan people. Instead, his general subservience to a brutal foreign military occupation and the corruption of his government had contributed to popular support for the Taliban and other insurgent movements.

The dilemma facing the US/NATO occupation in the lead-up to the Afghan elections, however, is that no-one among the list of potential alternative presidents has any more credibility than Karzai. They are either warlords guilty of human rights abuses or individuals who are viewed as even more open agents of the US government.

A poll conducted by the right-wing International Republican Institute found that just 31 percent of the respondents intended to vote for Karzai, compared with over 50 percent in the 2005 elections. His closest challenger however, former foreign minister Abdullah, polled only 7 percent. The third-placed contender registered barely 3 percent.

Senior New York Times foreign correspondent Dexter Filkins, who has covered the Afghan war since 2001, commented last month: “Some American officials express resignation that they may be stuck with him [Karzai] for the next five years. Indeed, the Obama administration appears to have begun preparing for that prospect.”

With at least the implicit consent of the Obama White House, Karzai has struck alliances with various warlords who can guarantee he wins the vote in the regions under their control.

His nominee for the post of first vice president is Mohammad Qasim Fahim, whose ethnic Tajik movement lords over much of north-eastern Afghanistan and whose militiamen make up a large proportion of the Afghan army. A 2005 Human Rights Watch report named Fahim as one of the commanders who ordered the “intentional killing of civilians, beating of civilians, abductions based on ethnicity, looting and forced labour” during the 1990s Afghan civil war.

Karzai has re-nominated Karim Khalili for the post of second vice president, in order to secure the support of ethnic Hazara powerbrokers in the central provinces of Afghanistan. Khalili, who commanded Hazara militias during the civil war, is also suspected of ordering atrocities against ethnic Pashtun civilians.

In the main provinces of the Pashtun south—large areas of which are actually controlled by Taliban insurgents—Karzai has secured the backing of some key pro-occupation powerbrokers.

In Kandahar, his family and tribal loyalists have influence. In Helmand, the former governor, suspected drug baron and Karzai ally Sher Mohammad Akhundzada, still retains considerable authority. In the south eastern province of Nangarhar, Pashtun warlord and governor Gul Agha Sherzai, a man with a bloody history in the 1990s when he was in control of Kandahar, has also endorsed Karzai. Earlier this year, Gul was touted in US ruling circles as a possible alternative president.

In the Uzbek-populated areas of northern Afghanistan, Karzai is relying on one of the country’s most despotic figures to deliver votes: Abdul Rashid Dostum. During Afghanistan’s tortured 30 years of war, Dostum served in the Soviet occupation forces and backed the pro-Moscow Najibullah government before switching sides. He joined with the US-backed Islamist militias that overthrew Najibullah, then was part of the fierce factional rivalry for power in Kabul before the Taliban finally took control.

By 2001, Dostum was part of the US-backed Northern Alliance that overthrew the Taliban regime. His militia and American special forces committed one of the worst war crimes of the Afghanistan invasion. Following the capture of the city of Kunduz in November 2001, they sealed hundreds of Taliban prisoners inside shipping containers and left them to die in blistering heat.

Karzai will not only benefit from his alliances with the warlords, but his ability to use the state apparatus to assist his campaign. In the last election in 2005, he blatantly awarded development projects to areas where he needed to consolidate support. The state-owned media gave him biased coverage and 75 percent of air time.

If these factors are not sufficient to guarantee Karzai’s victory, there is ample opportunity for wholesale fraud. A report this month by the International Crisis Group (ICG) pointed to the scale on which it may take place. Over 17 million voting cards have been issued in a country where half the population of 30 million is under the voting age, vast areas are under the control of the Taliban and women are culturally pressured not to participate.

In other words, a large number of people are likely to hold multiple cards. In the eastern province of Nuristan, for example, which has an estimated adult population of 130,000 and a large Taliban presence, there are 443,000 registered voters. The adult population of approximately 130,000 in the Tajik province of Panjshir has spawned 190,000 registered voters.

Tens of thousands of women are believed to have been registered to vote via their husbands or male relatives. The men will use the women's cards to cast additional votes, with the knowledge and acquiescence of local ballot officials. According to the ICG, the female turnout in Paktika province in the 2005 elections was so "unbelievably high" that the figures were never officially released.

On February 1, Barack Obama remarked in an interview that the US could not "rebuild Afghanistan into a Jeffersonian democracy". An accurate and honest statement would have been that his administration's only concern is that the Afghan government is subservient to American imperialist interests.

In the final analysis, the August 20 elections in Afghanistan are being held only to sustain the fiction in the US and NATO countries that the war has some noble agenda, not the predatory motive of geo-political control over strategic territory in resource-rich Central Asia. The result will have no credibility or legitimacy.