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Karzai Denies Afghan Vote Fraud, Blames Media

Speaking at his first press conference since Afghanistan's August 20 presidential election, President Hamid Karzai on September 17 denied that massive fraud had taken place to win him a second term in office and blamed the West's media for the controversy surrounding the charges of vote irregularities.

"Let's find out exactly if there was the kind of fraud committed that was reported in the international press," said Karzai. "I believe firmly, firmly in the integrity of the election and the integrity of the Afghan people and the integrity of the government in that process," said Karzai. "Fraud — if it is committed — it has to be investigated, but investigated fairly and without prejudice," he added.



Karzai called international media coverage of the elections "overwhelmingly negative" and said the Independent Election Commission and the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) should be allowed to conduct their investigations fairly and without foreign meddling. He also defended the integrity of the UN-sponsored ECC, saying it was independent and fair, stating, "I have a lot of respect for the commission."

The British *Times* reported that the Afghan president sought to minimize the increasing international concern over the charges of widespread ballot stuffing by his supporters, saying, "I want to tell everyone to respect the votes of the Afghan people." He added: "We are hopeful that our foreign friends respect the votes of Afghanistan's people and allow Independent Election Commission and the complaints commission to carry out their work with peace of mind and without interference, so we can announce the final results to the people of Afghanistan."

Karzai said that he was "surprised and rather shocked" by the European Union election observers' assessment that 1.5 million votes had been faked, but declined to comment on the figures. His office angrily rejected the EU fraud claim, calling it "partial, irresponsible, and in contradiction with Afghanistan's constitution."

VOA news explained that the votes were counted by the Afghan government-appointed Independent Election Commission, but that a partial recount has been ordered by another body, the Election Complaints Commission, which is dominated by appointees of the United Nations.

VOA also noted that the UN Mission in Afghanistan was divided over how strict the overseers should be concerning the fraud allegations. The second-in-command at the mission, American diplomat Peter Galbraith, confirmed that he left Afghanistan after a disagreement with Kai Eide, the Norwegian diplomat who heads the commission, about the post-election approach. VOA cited reports indicating that Galbraith has sided with the Canadian chairman of the Electoral Complaints Commission, Grant



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Kippen, who favors taking a hard line and tossing out all tainted ballots.

During his meeting with reporters, Karzai for the first time admitted that some government officials were biased in his favor, stating that "there were some government officials who were partial toward me." However, noted an AP report, in the same breath Karzai charged that other officials had manipulated results to favor his chief rival, Abdullah Abdullah.

Abdullah on September 17 said the preliminary count was the product of "state-engineered fraud" and called on Afghan and foreign officials to oppose the "corruption and malpractice" that he said was characteristic of the balloting. "This is the wrong way forward for the future of this country," he told reporters from the rose garden of his Kabul home. "This will only help the insurgents.... The champions out of this will be the Taliban."

The extent of voter fraud in this year's election in Afghanistan may never be determined, but if it is, it will be up to the Afghan people to make that determination. As far as the West is concerned, Karzai's past connections with Iran's leaders are of greater significance than the current election. When Karzai visited Iran in 2002, where he met Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, he told a news conference: "Our presence here is like going to your brother's house, because Iran is our brother country. Iran is not only a neighbor, but also a friend."

Decades of U.S., British, and other Western meddling in Iran, Afghanistan, and Iraq have brought neither peace nor good government to the region. What it has brought is the rise of radical, anti-Western regimes that repress their own citizens and threaten their neighbors.

Perhaps it is time to take Hamid Karzai at his word and allow the Afghan people to conduct their affairs without foreign meddling. And that would surely include bringing our troops home from the Middle East.

Photo of Hamid Karzai: AP Images

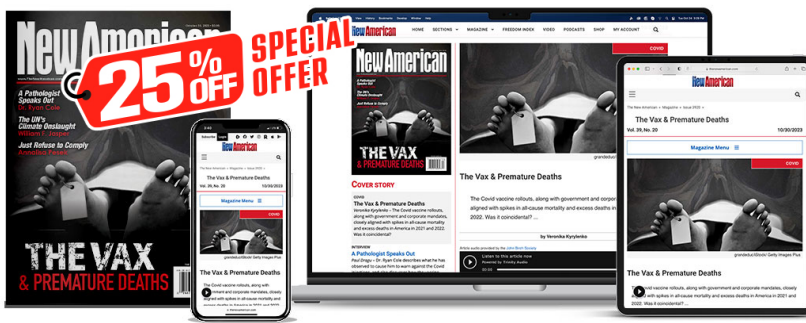


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