



Written by on August 14, 2009

## Upcoming Afghan Presidential Election

With Afghanistan's presidential election to be held on August 20, candidates held campaign rallies across the country. Afghan and foreign troops deployed in areas under Taliban control to provide security against threatened violent interruptions of voting. The al Jazeera network reported that the Afghan government claims to have struck a number of deals with Taliban commanders to ensure voter safety.



The Middle Eastern-based network quoted Ahmad Wali Karzai, the brother and campaign manager of incumbent President Hamid Karzai — who is leading in the polls and expected to win reelection — who said on August 14 that he had asked tribal leaders in the southern part of the country to convince Taliban leaders not to target voters.

"I asked [tribal] elders to talk to the Taliban and they ... have assured me that the local Taliban have agreed not to cause trouble," said Karzai. "There are some agreements already reached between elders and local Taliban, but not with those Taliban who are part of al-Qaeda."

However, Qari Yusuf, a Taliban spokesman in the south, denied that agreements about a truce on the day of the vote had been made. "If we accept the election, then we give legitimacy to the government and allow the invaders to invade our country," he told al Jazeera. "I am 100 percent sure even low-level commanders won't be traitors. Whatever Ahmed Wali said is propaganda."

An article in the *Los Angeles Times* for August 14 cited a poll indicating that although President Karzai enjoys a wide lead in the polls over his opponents, he may not have reached the 50-percent threshold needed to avoid a runoff.

The poll, conducted from July 16-26 by the International Republican Institute, gives Karzai a lead of nearly 20 percentage points over his major opponent, former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah.

However, the IRI poll, indicates that while Karzai's voter-approval rating has risen from 31 percent in May to 44 percent, those figures do not show that the president has enough support to avoid a runoff. Abdullah had an even sharper increase, with his support growing from 7 percent in May to 26 percent in July.

Other candidates also showed gains in the latest poll, further lessening Karzai's chances of winning an outright majority. Ramazan Bashedost, a populist legislator, saw his share increase to 10 percent, up from 3 percent in the previous IRI survey. And Ashraf Ghani, a former finance minister, increased his support from 3 percent to 6 percent.

A report in the *Washington Post* for August 14 quoted Jane Marriott, a senior adviser to U.S. special



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representative Richard C. Holbrooke, that the United States is "actively impartial" in the upcoming election.

The report also quoted Vali Nasr, a senior Holbrooke aide, who said in an interview: "I think the greatest pressure on the United States has been to convince Afghans and all the candidates that it is not interfering in the election one way or another. What the U.S. has consistently said is that it wants an election that is free and fair, and does not lead to indecision, confusion or violence, that the elections would be followed quickly by getting back to business."

The report observed that U.S. officials have been unenthusiastic about Karzai's performance as president since he was elected with unabashed U.S. support in 2005. But, though he has lost much credibility with Americans, there is no easy way for U.S. officials to back another contender without appearing to be interfering in Afghan affairs and inviting a backlash among Afghani voters. "Because they couldn't construct a plan to replace Karzai, I think they toned down the criticism and kept the option open of working with Karzai, should he get reelected," the *Post* quoted Zalmay Khalilzad, a former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan. "I think some administration officials realized that by being so openly critical of Karzai, they faced the risk that they could get a Karzai who was not only reelected but was hostile to the U.S. because of how he had been treated."

In December 2001, shortly after U.S.-led troops unseated the Taliban from power in Kabul, Karzai was named chairman of a 29-member governing committee of Afghanistan's interim transitional administration and was sworn in as leader on December 22. Shortly thereafter, Iran's state-run *Tehran Times* reported on January 3, 2002, that Karzai had met the previous day with Iran's deputy foreign minister for Asia-Pacific affairs, Mohsen Aminzadeh, to request Iran's help in rebuilding the war-torn country. Karzai thanked Iran for its past support, saying: "We want to see our Iranian brothers involved in every aspect of the reconstruction of Afghanistan."

Less than a month after attending George W. Bush's January 29, 2002, "State of the Union" address, where he heard the president denounce Iran — as well as North Korea and Iraq — as a member of the "axis of evil," Karzai went to Iran, where he met Iranian President Mohammad Khatami and 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."

That August, Khatami returned the courtesy by visiting Karzai in Afghanistan.

Karzai has shown a notable lack of discrimination in forging his political fortress. In addition to his propensity for extending overtures to the Iranians, almost immediately upon assuming office he granted key positions to members of the Northern Alliance, including Vice President Mohammed Fahim, who also served as defense minister. The Northern Alliance could succinctly be described as a motley collection of sadistic terrorists, ex-communists, and drug dealers who were scarcely an improvement over the Taliban. As British journalist Robert Fisk observed, "from 1992 to 1996, the Northern Alliance was a symbol of massacre, systematic rape and pillage."

We can think of far better uses of our nation's military and financial resources than putting our personnel in harm's way to guarantee the "integrity" of Afghanistan's upcoming election. In the past, whenever the United States has backed "the lesser of two evils" in foreign disputes, our poor moral judgment has always come back to haunt us.

*Photo of Hamid Karzai: AP Images*



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