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U.S. and UK Eye Post-election Afghanistan

Weeks after Iraq's August 20 presidential election, with disputed returns giving incumbent President Hamid Karzai more than 50 percent of the vote — enough to avoid a runoff against challenger Abdullah Abdullah — charges of vote fraud are still being investigated by the UN-backed Electoral Complaints Commission. As the process of determining Afghanistan's new government goes on, officials from the United States and the United Kingdom, who together form the bulk of the NATO forces that helped provide enough security to hold the election, have taken a strong interest in what comes next.



However, the two allies are not in complete agreement about the best solution for Afghanistan's electoral woes.

As the *Christian Science Monitor* reported on September 11: "Appearing on the BBC, U.S. special envoy to Afghanistan Richard Holbrooke had remarkably different things to say about the situation in Afghanistan than British Foreign Secretary David Miliband did."

Speaking on the BBC's *Newsnight* program, Holbrooke said that those criticizing the legitimacy of the election should not "jump to conclusions," and warned against extending the vote verification period: "The beneficiary of that would be the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, and I need to underscore that — the beneficiary of any delays of the sort you're talking about would be the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, and everybody understands that."

Holbrooke compared voting irregularities in Afghanistan with those in Western nations, in an apparent attempt to lend some legitimacy to the nation's electoral process: "Not all of the people in Afghanistan were able to vote, and as I've said many times before this election, there are imperfect elections throughout the west as well, and holding elections under these conditions is a very brave thing to do so let's see what happens before jumping to conclusions."

Citing a Reuters India report, the *Monitor* noted that UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband viewed the Afghan electoral crisis differently than Holbrooke: "The people of Afghanistan as well as the people of Britain need a credible government in Kabul that can actually lead that country in a serious way."

When asked on BBC Radio 4's *Today* program if he was concerned about the reports of widespread fraud and vote-rigging, Miliband replied: "We have been careful not to make any claims about the election until all the aspects are fully investigated. We will not be party to any whitewash in respect of this election. It is vital that there is a credible result that comes out of these elections."

"Millions did vote and we need to make sure that the courage they showed and the courage that our forces have shown is matched by a determination to get the real result," Miliband told BBC. He continued: "Significant numbers of people didn't come out because they were frightened but equally



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millions did vote and we need to make sure that the courage they showed and the courage that our forces have shown is actually matched by a determination to get the real result. If President [Hamid] Karzai won then he should be the president; there's then big responsibilities on him to reach out right across the Afghan political spectrum."

"But obviously," observed the British foreign secretary, "if he didn't get the 50 percent in the first round then there has to be a second round."

A report in the British *Times* on September 11 noted that while Miliband's comments seemed to favor some sort of national unity government in which Abdullah could play a role, neither Britain nor America is likely to call for such a resolution openly, for fear of being seen as directly interfering in the Afghan electoral process.

However, the *Times* reported, in their conversation on September 10, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and President Barack Obama both referred to the need for the opposing parties there to achieve consensus on issues such as security and the economy. Both governments' officials have pointed towards a unity government to achieve those ends.

As the people of Afghanistan, under the watchful eye of the Electoral Complaints Commission, the United States, and Britain, attempt to resolve the election and create a credible government, VOA News cites an international London-based think tank called the International Council on Security and Development, which has released a new map showing that for the first time the Taliban have a "permanent presence" in 80 percent of Afghanistan.

Alexander Jackson, a policy analyst at the think tank, said: "We're now seeing Taliban control across the country. And one of the most significant things that we're seeing in this latest map is the increased level of Taliban presence in the north of the country. Provinces such as Kunduz and Balkh, which previously were relatively stable, are now seeing very high levels of Taliban activity."

VOA noted that the report's release comes at a sensitive time because the Obama administration is debating whether to commit more forces to the war in Afghanistan at a time when the war is becoming increasingly unpopular in the United States.

Even President Obama's Democratic allies in Congress have made statements about the lack of congressional support for a troop increase. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said at a news conference on September 10 that there was little support for such an increase, saying: "I don't think there's a great deal of support for sending more troops to Afghanistan, in the country or in the Congress."

And the chairman of the Senate Armed Forces Committee, Michigan Democrat Carl Levin, said in a *New York Times* interview that he advised against an increase in the near future: "I just think we should hold off on a commitment to send more combat troops until these additional steps to strengthen the Afghan security forces are put in motion."

Reuters news observed that an assessment of the war from U.S. Army General Stanley McChrystal, the commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, is expected to set the stage for a request by the military for more troops.

Pelosi said she had not yet seen this assessment, which was sent to the Pentagon last week. "I hope that we will be briefed on the McChrystal [report] when the president receives it," said the Speaker. "Perhaps next week we will see that."

McChrystal met with military officials at the Dutch Defense Ministry on September 11, the eighth



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anniversary of the terrorist attacks upon which U.S. involvement in Afghanistan were based. Speaking to reporters, the General said he did not see a large al-Qaeda presence in the nation whose former Taliban government once hosted the terrorist organization headed by Osama bin Laden. "I do not see indications of a large al-Qaida presence in Afghanistan now," McChrystal told reporters. But he warned that Osama bin Laden's network still maintains contact with insurgents and seeks to use areas of Afghanistan they control as bases, adding: "I do believe that al-Qaida intends to retain those relationships because they believe it is symbiotic ... where the Taliban has success, that provides a sanctuary from which al-Qaida can operate transnationally."

The commanding general used an interesting analogy to describe the nature of his assessment to President Obama: "My position here is a little bit like a mechanic. We've got a situation with a vehicle and I've been asked to look at it and tell the owner what the situation is and what it will cost to make the vehicle run correctly and I will provide that," he said. "Now I understand that the vehicle owner then has to make a decision on what the car is worth, how much longer he intends to drive it — whether he wants it to look good or just run."

If we were to continue McChrystal's analogy we might ask: Where, exactly, do we want the vehicle to go, what is the purpose of the trip, what is the cost of the trip (in both human lives and dollars), and finally, by what constitutional authority was the trip authorized?



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