

Hiccups in Afghan poll

Afghanistan

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Dawn 13/10/09

A REMARKABLE development has taken place in Afghanistan. In conformity with the predictions of President Hamid Karzai and the Americans, an extremely high turnout was witnessed in the presidential elections of October 9. The turnout, by all accounts, was heavy in all parts of the country, and credible reports suggest that women in large numbers were among those who lined up for hours to cast their vote. No estimates have appeared as yet regarding the total number of votes cast, nor are there any prospects of official figures being announced by the Joint Electoral Management Body (JEMB) before October 30.

However, eyewitness accounts appear to suggest that the turnout may have been as large as 80 per cent of the registered voters, and that it was just as heavy in the troubled south and southeast as it was in the relatively calmer areas in the north. The Taliban did not make any serious effort to disrupt the elections and their previous threats had failed to deter the voters even in areas formerly regarded as Taliban strongholds.

Earlier that day, there were fears that the exercise would become infructuous when opposition candidates demonstrated to reporters that the indelible ink with which the voters' fingers were being marked to prevent double voting could be easily washed off. On this basis, they said that they were boycotting the polls and would demand fresh elections. However, the OSCE election observer team termed their demand for the abrogation of polls as unjustified, bore testimony to the heavy turnout and asked that dissatisfied candidates seek to have their grievances addressed in accordance with the procedures laid down by election laws. Early on Sunday, it was also announced that an independent commission would be set up to consider the complaints regarding the conduct of the elections.

It will take some time to determine how genuine the complaint about the indelible ink was and how much of an impact it had. Afghan officials have maintained that some ill-trained members of the Afghan election staff used the wrong pens to mark fingers, but that this happened only in a few places. Sitting in New Delhi, I heard the Kabul correspondent of the independent Indian News Channel NDTV explain that the indelible ink used in Afghanistan had in fact been donated by India as its contribution to the election process in Afghanistan. It was his

UNSG's representative Arnault. The State Department issued a statement congratulating the people of Afghanistan on their successful participation in the elections, and having noted the complaints, expressed its confidence that the JEMB would review these. President Bush declared the election a success while making no mention of the boycott call. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice was quoted as being "just certain" that this election would be deemed legitimate. Secretary of Defence Rumsfeld described the elections as "breath-taking" and added that even while he recognized that the media would criticize the minute errors, including the fact that "some ink came off", the elections were an "enormous accomplishment". There was thus no room for doubt left about how the American administration wanted the elections to be viewed.

Nor was there any doubt about how the rest of the western world felt about this. The EU representative in Afghanistan was involved in the effort mounted by the UN and the US to persuade the candidates to accept the appointment of the independent commission as a sufficient reason to drop their call for new elections. Chancellor Schroeder, while in Pakistan and en route to Afghanistan, let it be known that despite the problems the election had been a success.

Almost certainly, as a result of this, a number of candidates, most notably

election rules. The mixing and formal counting of votes would start only after the independent commission ruled on the complaints of the candidates.

The result would appear to be a foregone conclusion. Karzai would be the clear winner. If the protests of the candidates and the heavy peaceful turnout in the predominantly Pushtun south where Karzai was clearly the candidate of choice were not evidence enough, we also have the evidence provided by an exit poll conducted by 230 teams sent out by The International Republican Institute. The latter has close links with the Republican Party but no direct affiliation. It found Karzai ahead of Qanooni by 43 percentage points and an unnamed candidate in third place with only five per cent of the vote.

The NGO revealed that this poll was based on the findings so far obtained from a little more than 10,000 voters, but it was confident that the margin of error would not be more than one per cent. This is a credible finding and should be regarded as such even though it comes from a pro-Bush organization that is clearly interested in getting acceptance of Karzai's success well before the counting of the votes is completed so that it has a favourable impact on Bush's own election prospects.

Once he has been formally declared winner, Karzai will no doubt have to give significant posts to the Panjsheris, the Uzbeks and the Hazaras for the sake of ethnic balance. Perhaps some such assurances have been held out already on his behalf. But following his legitimization by the election, he will be dealing with them from a position of far greater strength than he was as interim president.

Two significant consequences flow from the fact that this historic election has invited such enthusiastic participation and has been free from violence. First, Bush will be able to portray this as a genuine success and as a vindication of his policy, giving the lie to the implicit assertion by

On the day of presidential elections in Afghanistan, opposition candidates said they would boycott the polls because the supposedly indelible ink, used to mark the voters' fingers to prevent them from casting their ballot more than once, could easily be washed off. However, poll monitors said that candidates dissatisfied with the way the polls were conducted could take recourse to electoral rules.

Qanooni, caved in and agreed that the question of the ink should be resolved by an independent commission which would also consider other complaints filed by the candidates until Tuesday evening. Despite the fact that the immediately publicized call for boycott of elections was given fairly early in the day by all 15 dissenting candidates, there was no diminution in voter enthusiasm. Many polling stations stayed open till long after the scheduled time to allow those who had queued up to cast their vote. The rejection of the boycott call by the voters must also have had a sobering effect on the candidates, and persuaded them to accept the face-saving opportunity provided by the appointment of the independent commission.

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Kerry that by diverting attention and resources to Iraq, Bush had given a fresh lease of life to terrorism and the Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. It has gone so much better than had been expected that it will also cause many in America to believe that Bush's policies may prove to be equally successful in Iraq. The fact that the Mahdi army of Moqtada Al-Sadr is now being disarmed in Sadr City and that there has been a visible diminution in the level of violence in Iraq in the last week will lend him further credence. With this will come, if he is re-elected, further expressions of appreciation for the role the added presence of Pakistani forces on the border played in reducing the Taliban's disruptive capabilities.

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It will take some time to determine how genuine the complaint about the indelible ink was and how much of an impact it had. Afghan officials have maintained that some ill-trained members of the Afghan election staff used the wrong pens to mark fingers, but that this happened only in a few places. Sitting in New Delhi, I heard the Kabul correspondent of the independent Indian News Channel NDTV explain that the indelible ink used in Afghanistan had in fact been donated by India as its contribution to the election process in Afghanistan. It was his view that the problem arose because, at the insistence of the Afghans, the ink was supplied in tins rather than in bottles, and its quality may have been affected by its interaction with the metal. If this proves true, the case for deliberate sabotage at Karzai's prompting is weakened further since Qanooni or other candidates who had received Indian support in the past could not plausibly claim that India had deliberately sought to undermine their election prospects. It is very probable that many people who had registered more than once voted more than once, but one can be certain that this was done as much by Karzai's opponents as it was by his supporters.

In the meanwhile, the Free and Fair Elections Foundation of Afghanistan said that over all, a "fairly democratic environment" had been observed in the polling centres by its 2,300 observers. UN officials and Afghan election officials said that except for minor problems the voting in the five southern provinces went off smoothly, and there was no problem of inedible ink there.

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Some of the candidates were, at least in theory, holding out. The spokesman for Ahmad Shah Ahmadzai asserted that the election was not even "one per cent of international standards" and that numerous reports of voter fraud had been received. However, like the representatives of other dissenting candidates, he also stated that Ahmadzai did not intend protesting formally to the independent commission since they did not believe that the Afghans working for the commission were impartial.

It would appear, therefore, that what appeared to have the potential of becoming a major crisis has now been defused so as to appear no more than a minor hiccup.

Form will still have to be observed. At the time of writing, it has been announced that the independent commission will be a three-man body consisting of a Canadian diplomat, a Swedish election expert and a member yet to be nominated by the JEMB. It was also announced that while the collection of the ballot boxes at the eight counting centres would continue and poll officers would count the number of votes cast at each polling station to ensure that they do not exceed the number of registered voters for that polling station, they will not mix them with ballots from other centres as per

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Second, it would be naive to assume that the Taliban, who until a couple of days before the elections were still able to mount fairly significant attacks and whose power of intimidation remained largely unimpaired, have become impotent. It is far more likely that Karzai's wooing of the moderate Taliban, Pakistan's influence on these elements, and the dangerous consequences that would have flowed from the disenfranchisement of the Pushtuns, helped the moderates prevail in Taliban councils. They could then force the representatives of the Al Qaeda and the hard-line Taliban to permit violence-free polls and to renounce attempts to persuade the Pushtuns to boycott the elections. Many of them may now join the mainstream. If this analysis is correct there will be positive consequences not only for Afghanistan but also for Pakistan where extremists have drawn strength from the activities of the hard-line Taliban and their Al Qaeda mentors. Needless to say, Karzai, too, will have reason to be grateful to Pakistan.

All in all, the vast majority of Pakistanis have reason to be pleased with the way in which the election has gone and the hiccup has been handled.

The writer is a former foreign secretary