

Elections in Afghanistan and the Taliban

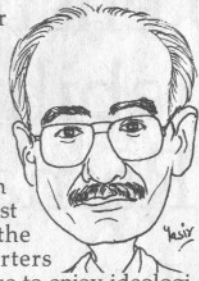
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The Nation

Whatever their worth as a genuine and free exercise in elections, the polls being held in Afghanistan on October 9 will test the claim of the Taliban supporters that they continue to enjoy ideological influence and popularity despite having been overthrown.

The religious militia has already lost the first battle. It failed to persuade the Afghans not to register as voters. Against the UN estimates of there being 9.5 million voters in the country, 9.9 million have got their names on the electoral rolls. With 42 percent of eligible women voters having been registered, a fairly large female population is ready to vote.

The fact that the Taliban should have resorted to intimidation and threats to dissuade people from cooperating with the election authorities is in itself an indication of the militia's weak position. That people have ignored these is another blow to its prestige. The registration by the refugees in Pakistan is no less impressive. Out of 600,000 to 800,000 eligible vot-



ers, 650,000 have been registered. Twenty five percent of women voters have agreed to get their names in the voters' list.

The next test would be the turn out on the polling day. Keeping in view the number of voters exercising their choice during elections in the Third World countries in general one does expect an extraordinarily high turn out. Anything comparable to the percentage of votes cast in neighbouring Pakistan would be widely considered respectable. This is all the more so for the presidential elections are a novelty in Afghanistan. Most of the voters will see a ballot paper for the first time in their lives.

The ballot box at one polling station in Hindukush will take two weeks to deliver to the counting post, by donkey. People in areas of the type have little understanding of, or interest in, the exercise. There will be no polling station in Mandol in Nuristan, which even by the Afghan standards is considered extremely dangerous. "No one goes there. Not even the Taliban", says David Avery, chief of operations for the joint electoral management body.

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disrupt the elections by use of force. Twenty five suspected militants, with sufficient arms and ammunition, were arrested on Saturday in Kabul. Fifteen were nabbed in a nightly raid in Spin Boldak, neighbouring Pakistan. A day earlier, a group of sixty militants was intercepted near the same town.

One expects attacks by militants on the election day. There are already reports of *shabnama's* or night posters being pasted on mosques and other public places threatening those who go for voting with retribution. Suicide bombings, rocket attacks and mine blasts are however an expression of weakness rather than strength as they indicate desperation caused by failure to persuade the people. There is little likelihood however of the militants disrupting the exercise on national level. Second senior most

US commander Maj Gen Eric Olson told reporters on Friday that there was no sign that the Taliban were capable of creating major violence on the polling day.

Elections held with a reasonable turn out would indicate that many people want to have a political system altogether different from that of the Taliban. It would show that people want democracy with moderate leaders rather than a theocracy controlled by clerics. The elections would introduce for the first time in the history of Afghanistan a new way of changing the government i.e. through elections. The religious militia will find it difficult to persuade people to resort to militancy when a peaceful way has been made available.

In order to continue to be a factor in Afghan politics, the Taliban will have to change their outlook. They will have to accept that the people, both men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims, have alone the right to elect the head of the government who may not come up to the rigid standards required from an *amirul momineen*. They will have to agree that the elected parliament alone has the right to make laws and lay down arms and resort to

peaceful parliamentary politics. This would imply they will no more indulge in jihad against the components of the northern alliance but compete with them peacefully. In other words they will have to follow in the footsteps of the MMA in neighbouring Pakistan.

Unless a new leadership emerges within the militia, it may not be possible for it to make such a radical departure from their traditional position. In case they fail to change, they may continue to exist in small pockets but will have little influence on national politics. Keeping in view the primitive nature of the Afghan society, it might not be possible to totally eradicate their influence in a short period.

To be able to do so would require that successive elected governments match the performance of the religious militia in maintaining law and order, providing easy – though primitive and crude – justice and in keeping the warlords under check. The Taliban were a creature of the regional politics. With profound changes taking place in South Asia the services of the Taliban may no longer be needed by them who created, financed and launched them.

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