

History is being made in Afghanistan. This presidential election is the decisive step in the democratization process that started last year with the convening of the Loya Jirga. The constitution adopted by this body establishes a democracy with a presidential executive and a bicameral legislature. In the given circumstances, the constitutional debate turned out to be the easy part. The real challenge was undertaking the electoral exercise in a brutalized society like Afghanistan. With elections in Afghanistan, the first step has been taken.

United Nations sources report that despite all security threats, more than 10 million Afghans registered to vote. But much more important is the fact that a vast majority of them actually turned up on election day. In a country where the number of guns and not the number of votes shaped the political transition process in the past, a largely peaceful electoral battle between 18 presidential candidates (many of whom former warlords) is nothing short of a political miracle. No wonder President Bush described the Afghan elections as a 'marvellous thing'.

The first person to vote in the elections was a young woman of 19. In a society where, until only a few years back, women were denied basic civic

Between two fires

Afghanistan
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rights like education, this is truly remarkable. That one of the presidential candidates was a woman also contributed to making this process more democratic. Success in Afghanistan is vital not only for geo-strategic but also for ideological reasons. The Iraq crisis had convinced many in the American establishment that Muslim societies are 'incurable'; democracy is a practical impossibility for the next two generations. This new post-Iraq cynicism could have been disastrous for the region.

Fortunately the elections went ahead peacefully. They have deprived cynics of a pretext to deny democracy to the Muslim masses. If Afghans with their bloody past can successfully carry out an electoral exercise, why can't the other nations in the Muslim world? Americans now have to make a choice: will they allow democratic regimes to flourish in the Muslim world? Afghanistan has, in more ways than one, shown that Muslims are capable of a democratic transition.

This brings us to the key question. Are these elections a victory for the

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United States and its values? If success is to be measured in symbolic terms, then certainly it was one. The Afghans demonstrated their political maturity and, despite all the violence preceding the elections, turned out on the given day.

But things are not that simple. Afghanistan even today is a bitterly divided country. That Hamid Karzai will, in all probability, win this election does not change the fact that the writ of his government will not extend beyond Kabul. Life outside Kabul is still mired in medieval practices. It is impossible to form political groups or publish newspapers. Women and children are the worse victims of this stifling environment. In some places, the conditions have

The Nations
actually deteriorated after the US-led invasion.

At present, the situation on the ground is that Atta Mohammad and Rashid Dostum dominate the north, Ismail Khan the west, Hazrat Ali the east, Gul Agha Shirazi the south and Abdul Rasul Sayyaf the centre. These forces are involved in grave human rights violations like torture, rape, extortion and extra-judicial killings. And these problems have been created by people who are supposedly American allies. Taliban remnants, left out of the political process, are making every effort to sabotage the whole enterprise.

Ayman Al-Zawahiri, the Al-Qaida chief of operations, in a recent video tape message regarding Afghanistan, said: "The Americans are hiding in their trenches and refuse to come out to face the mujahideen, as the mujahideen shell and fire on them, and cut roads off around them. Their defence is only to bomb by air, wasting U.S. money as they kick up dust." Al-Zawahiri was relentless in his verbal attack and perceptively pointed to

the link between Iraq and Afghanistan. "The Americans in both countries are between two fires; if they continue they bleed to death and if they withdraw they lose everything." No wonder he could claim with confidence that an American defeat in Afghanistan is only 'a matter of time.'

The Afghan election is a pointer towards things to come. The people there have demonstrated that Muslims have the desire and the ability to cultivate democratic values. This in itself is a challenging proposition. The Americans traditionally have favoured regimes in the Muslim world that are non-democratic and authoritarian. But democratization of Afghanistan, to be closely followed by Iraq, will open up a Pandora's box.

What if anti-American parties rise to power in the Iraqi elections (or in an election in any other Arab country)? Will the Americans accept such results? Highly unlikely! Algeria is a case in point. The consequences of such hypocrisy will be tragic. Americans even today are paying the price for the ill conceived past policy of sponsoring authoritarian proxies in Afghanistan and Iraq. Democratic values must triumph if the US wants to succeed in its conflict with extremism. The final battle against the war on terrorism will be fought on the battlefield of ideas.