

As the Afghan polls approach

By Najmuddin A. Shaikh

Amir in Afghanistan 7/9/04

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Other reports claim that an alliance comprising the Taliban, Jalaluddin Haqqani, Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, commanders associated with Maulvi Yunus Khalis and Akbar Agha had agreed upon united action to disrupt the elections by attacking polling stations.

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A notable exception to the foregoing assessment of the warlords is the current situation in Herat. Emir Ismail, facing an attack by a local Pushtun commander Amanullah, had to ultimately seek the intervention of the Americans and the Afghan national force to have a ceasefire put into effect. Ismail claimed, rightly I believe, that Amanullah's actions were endorsed if not instigated by Karzai's ministers. Ismail himself says that these ministers acted without Karzai's knowledge but one is inclined to believe that Karzai may well have used Amanullah, with the consent of the coalition

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Early in August when the number of registered voters had reached 9.5 million the UN revised its estimate to 10.5 million voters. Now by all accounts the number of people registered has exceeded this number even though it is conceded that only 40 or 41 per cent of those registered are women in a country where there is said to be a 1:1 ratio between men and women, and when it is also conceded that in some areas of the south and southeast only a limited percentage of the originally estimated voters have registered.

In the Panjshir valley, the number of registered voters has come close to 125,000 as against the estimate of 49,573. In Mazar Sharif city, UN officials readily conceded that the number registered far exceeded the

original estimate of eligible voters and so it went down the line all across the north. UN officials also concede that many under-age persons may have been registered because in the time available it was not possible to verify every doubtful case.

The fact is that the registration teams — primarily Afghans recruited by the UN and sent into the field after some training — were forced by pressure from local warlords to turn a blind eye towards double or treble or underage registrations.

A conservative estimate would be that in the north fraudulent registration is about 33 per cent of the total and that in the south and southeast, because of the security situation at least 20 per cent of those eligible have not been registered.

The only safeguard against fraudulent votes is that every voter would have his finger dabbed with indelible ink. One can be certain that the warlords who arranged for double or treble registration have also made provision for overcoming this obstacle — one of which may simply be the intimidation of the election officials.

This over or under registration will not perhaps be of much consequence in the presidential election. There are theoretically 18 candidates, and much is being made of the current deliberations between Karzai's 17 rivals to choose one among them to con-

rupt the elections by attacking polling stations.

American operations against the Taliban and Hikmatyar's supporters have been intensified in recent weeks and have had some success. However, there have also been reports of some air raids being misdirected and causing civilian casualties fuelling resentment particularly in the Pushtun areas. It is more than likely that even though there may have been genuine enthusiasm among the Afghans for registering as voters, a substantial number of them will be hesitant about actually voting in the current insecure environment. This would be particularly true in the south and south-east where the Taliban continue to operate with relative ease.

It has been announced that on September 1, the removal of heavy weapons from Kabul had been completed and that some measure of success had attended efforts to collect such weapons from other locations in Afghanistan including the Panjshir Valley — the stronghold of Marshal Fahim and his cohort Qanooni. This is a notable achievement and should help create a better ambience for the elections.

Unfortunately, no progress appears to have been made towards the disarming of the militia. According to one estimate, the Shura-e Nazar militia commanded by Fahim numbers 50,000 and a substantial part of this force is based in Kabul or its immediate environs. Similarly, the militia of the Hizb-e-Wahdat, the Shia or Hazara party is also present in fairly substantial numbers in Kabul and, of course, in the Bamiyan area.

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Elsewhere in the country the militias of warlords like the Uzbek Commander Dostum, the Tajik protege of Marshal Fahim, Atta Mohammad, the self-styled Emir of Herat, Ismail, Commander Daood, and in Jalalabad Hazrat Ali remain largely

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What Karzai has been able to achieve through political machinations and perhaps the covert use of American muscle is important because the international community has refused to go beyond token gestures towards restoring security or helping the Karzai administration enforce its writ beyond the immediate environs of Kabul. Anywhere else there would have been a hue and cry when in a spectacular abdication of responsibility the Nato powers decided that they would increase the size of their force in Afghanistan by only 1,500 troops for providing security during the elections and declared quite complacently that their ISAF would have no part to play in the disarming of the warlords. The UN and Karzai's administration had both estimated that ISAF needed to have a force level at least double the 6,500 they currently have.

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Similarly, Qanooni may project himself as the Tajik candidate, but can be sure only of the Tajik vote in Panjshir. That, even after fraudulent registration, represents only a small portion of the total Tajik vote. Rabbani, who commands Tajik support in Badakhshan and Ismail with his Herat vote probably will go along with Karzai rather than Qanooni. Above all, there will be American pressure.

Given this situation, Karzai will, in all probability, be easily elected. The only problem may be that voting will be patchy in the south and southeast, and Karzai may find himself beholden to the northern voters for his election. Perhaps a little ballot box stuffing, not unfamiliar in South Asia, may solve this problem. Will such an election give Karzai legitimacy? Probably not. But it does not matter because legitimacy without the military clout of the Americans would not help him stay in power or solve the warlord or narcotics problems of Afghanistan.

The real problem, however, will arise when the parliamentary elections are held and when constituencies are drawn up on the basis of registered voters. Then the over-registration in the north will change the ethnic balance and lead to the sort of furore that could bring about major unrest.

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