

Between now and November

USA

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WHILE the final results of the recent Afghan polls will take time in coming, and will probably not be officially certified until the end of October or later, it appears that Hamid Karzai will emerge as the clear winner with at least 60, perhaps even 70, per cent of the vote. The latest figures suggest that more than 75 per cent of registered voters cast their vote. With some one million votes (13 per cent of the total number) having been counted by October 17, Karzai was leading with 62.6 per cent, while his closest rival Yunus Qanooni had mustered only 17.7 per cent of the votes.

An interesting statistic showed that Qanooni had secured 96 per cent of the votes counted in the Panjshir Valley (only a quarter of the votes cast), while Karzai, despite having Ahmad Shah Masood's brother on his ticket, had secured only 0.5 per cent. Panjshir, of course, is the constituency in which the total number of voters registered exceeded the UN estimate of the population by 150 per cent.

The overwhelming support for Qanooni may be the result of some ballot stuffing, intimidation and other irregularities, and in the Panjshir Valley this would be comparatively easy for Marshal Fahim to arrange. However, for the most part, it is indicative of the ethnic divisions that exist in Afghanistan. The Panjshiri Tajiks see the elections as marking the end of

as a precedent for the elections scheduled for January in Iraq. While recognizing that a foreign military presence would be required in Afghanistan, they have also started work on reducing the American role by calling upon the Nato countries to agree to a merger of Isaf forces, currently under Nato command, with the American forces there. So far, this has not worked. At the last Nato meeting, both France and Germany rejected the American suggestion, but the Americans can be expected to persevere. The Nato countries and Isaf spokesmen have made it clear that they do not want to be drawn into the forcible disarming of warlords or into the battle against the narcotics mafia. The problem, however, is that with Afghanistan's opium production (possibly exceeding 4,000 tons) being destined largely for Europe after saturating markets in Iran and Pakistan, the Europeans, more than the Americans, have an interest in curbing this in Afghanistan. For that they need to break the warlords' hold on regional

what could be done in Iraq, Powell conceded that the insurgency was a serious problem to which, implicitly, he saw no early solution. There are, however, some bright spots. The disarming of the Mahdi militia is proceeding, albeit at a snail's pace. The ferocious bombing of Fallujah, identified by the Americans as the headquarters of the Zarqawi-led foreign insurgents, has continued apace and has apparently, according to some reports, heightened the cleavage between the insurgents and the local residents. But other reports suggest that indiscriminate bombing and the number of civilian casualties have given local residents fresh ground for supporting the insurgency.

The Americans are apparently preparing for a full-scale assault on Fallujah but since they need the Iraqis to be in the vanguard this will have to wait upon the completion of the training of the Iraqis. In the meanwhile, the British have been asked to send some 600 troops to Baghdad and its vicinity so that

American troops can be freed up, probably for the assault on Fallujah.

The debate in the UK parliament on this request has been instructive. Many Labour MPs, normally supportive of Tony Blair, called for a rejection of the US request, calling it a ploy to demonstrate to the American electorate that America's Iraq policy had international support. They also maintained that America's heavy-handed tactics were responsible for the rising tempo of the insurgency. If British troops were placed under American command in the insurgency-hit vicinity of Baghdad they may be asked to take actions that could make them subject to trial in the International Criminal Court

How far the recently held Afghan polls and the Iraqi elections, scheduled for January 2005, will affect the outcome of the American presidential vote next month is not clear. But, given that the American electorate has largely made up its mind, these issues are not likely to have more than a marginal impact on voters' decision. It appears that voter registration and turnout will be the weightier factors in the upcoming US elections.

elections as marking the end of their current dominance of the government structure in Kabul. By the same token, the Pushtuns, constituting the majority of the Afghan population, will have voted overwhelmingly for Karzai since in their view this is the only way to break the Panjshiri stranglehold on the levers of power in Kabul.

It is also probable that the Uzbeks voted entirely for Dostum — he is currently in third place with a little over nine per cent of the counted vote — while the Hazaras divided their vote between Karzai, whose running mate Khalili is a popular Hazara leader, and Mohaqiq. The Badakshan Tajiks owe their loyalty to former president Burhanuddin Rabbani. His son-in-law is Karzai's running mate, and he made it clear early on in the election after reconciliation efforts failed that he would support Karzai.

It was, therefore, easy to predict even before elections were held that Karzai would be the clear winner and no runoff election would be needed. Complaints of poll irregularities created a minor glitch but some American pressure and the enormous voter turnout persuaded Qanooni and other candidates not to make the "irregularities" a make or break issue and to accept, subject to the Independent Commission's inquiry into alleged irregularities, the results of the elections. Already Qanooni is making noises about helping his former friend Karzai to "reconstruct Afghanistan and to forge national unity".

Karzai's election would be major triumph for the Afghan people. It would give him the legitimacy he has so far lacked, and hopefully the clout he needs to persuade the Americans and Isaf to offer greater cooperation in curbing the warlords and hastening the reconstruction process. It will also enable him to appeal with greater force for the moderate Taliban to avail themselves of an amnesty offer and return to mainstream Afghan life. It is not a panacea for Afghanistan's myriad problems, but it is a start towards reconciliation and reconstruction. It is also clear, as the commander of the US forces in Afghanistan has said, that a foreign military presence in Afghanistan would be needed for the foreseeable future to support the government's stabilization efforts.

For Bush, however, this is an enormous success. Secretary of State Powell, Secretary of Defence Rumsfeld and other spokesmen for the Bush administration have trumpeted the peaceful elections and the enormous turnout not only as a vindication of the administration's Afghan policy but, equally importantly,

power.

The question of an exit strategy, or at least a burden-sharing strategy, is extremely important for Bush in these last three weeks before the American elections. One of the charges that Kerry has made — and it is a charge that arouses great concern — is the fact that the United States cannot continue to meet its force requirements in Afghanistan and Iraq without reintroducing the draft. Bush has denied the charge but reservists have been asked to extend their service repeatedly, and it is therefore clear that there is a manpower shortage in the American armed forces, which, if demand remains at the current level, cannot be made up by the accelerated recruitment of volunteers.

Furthermore, if Nato countries can be persuaded to accept the merger of forces in Afghanistan it would reduce at least in some measure the validity of the allegation that the Bush administration was isolated and was having "to go it alone" in Afghanistan and Iraq. Even if they do not succeed, they would have made the point that they had tried and that a "unilateralist" policy was being forced upon the Bush administration rather than being preferred by it.

As regards the search for Osama bin Laden, Secretary Powell is insistent that there has been no let up in efforts to find him. He claimed that perhaps three-quarters of the top leadership had been captured or killed. He admitted that he is probably still alive and "operating in those western reaches of Pakistan or perhaps going back and forth across the border". He and other administration officials, even the normally choleric Khalilzad, have been lyrical in their praise for the effort Pakistan has mounted in the tribal areas.

Faced with the charge that last year Bush had said he was not concerned about Bin Laden, Powell maintained that Bush had "never taken his eye off the Bin Laden ball". It is clear, however, that after the failure of the "hammer and anvil" operation earlier this year on the Pakistan-Afghan border, the Americans have started giving lower priority to military operations for capturing or killing Bin Laden. There may then be greater American focus on using US forces in Afghanistan to do what Karzai wants — disarm the warlords, extend the writ of the central government and provide reconstruction assistance.

In Iraq, the situation is more mixed. Even while touting the example of peaceful elections in Afghanistan as a possible model of

International Criminal Court

for war crimes — something that could not happen to the Americans since they have rejected the ICC.

Some of this may reflect the rising anti-American sentiment in the UK, but much of it is based on having perhaps a more accurate picture of American actions in Iraq than are available to us here or indeed to the Americans. How far this will influence US elections is not clear but it will certainly bear out the charge that even the most steadfast of American allies are having problems with US policies. It is also to be noted in this context that while Bush, in his campaign speeches, highlighted the support received from countries like Poland, the Polish president has announced that his country's troops will start withdrawing from Iraq early next year.

The fact, however, is that the American electorate has largely made up its mind. Whatever changes there were to be in favour of Kerry occurred during the debates. Developments in Afghanistan may tilt the balance marginally in favour of Bush. But then, the continuing bad news from Iraq and from America's allies in Iraq, may marginally tilt the balance in favour of Kerry.

Some voters may be influenced by the endorsements offered by influential newspapers. *The New York Times* has come out in favour of Kerry, and the normally Republican-leaning influential newspaper in the key state of Florida, *The Tampa Herald* has refused to endorse Bush.

Kerry's campaign managers are frantically trying to prevent the airing of a viciously biased documentary on Kerry's Vietnam record on a chain of television stations owned by the Sinclair group. It will probably air it since the Federal Communications Commission, headed by Secretary Powell's son, is not likely to find legal grounds for prohibiting it. But all this will be marginal.

The really decisive factor will be voter registration and voter turnout. It appears that where there are Republican officials in charge, minority voters, traditionally Democratic supporters, are having difficulty getting registered and the Democrats are filing lawsuits in this connection. The general conjecture is that this will be not only one of the most closely fought elections in American history but also among the most litigious. If the registration drive succeeds and Kerry's supporters can turn out the vote Kerry has a chance. Otherwise, it seems that Bush will prevail.

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