



Afghanistan: Presidential Election and Thereafter **Some Reflections**

*Nihar Ranjan Das**

With the official announcement of the preliminary results of the Presidential election held on 20 August 2009, Afghanistan has come a long way to a phase of its choice. The result shows the incumbent President Hamid Karzai leading with 54.6 % against his main rival and former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah with 27.8 % of the total votes polled. There are serious allegations of electoral malpractices against President Hamid Karzai and his supporters. Notwithstanding that, successful completion of the Presidential election will give a new dimension and direction to Afghanistan in its fight against terrorism. In fact Afghanistan has now entered an era of democracy and development in the aftermath of the ouster of Taliban rule. Although it is still very early to predict durable peace and political stability in Afghanistan, the popular support for institution building augurs well for a country that has been devastated due to three decades of war since 1979.

Afghanistan is a multi-cultural and a multi-ethnic society and has a Presidential form of Government. The Parliament consists of a bi-cameral National Assembly called Jirga. In the House of People (Wolesi Jirga) 249 members are elected by a single non-transferable vote. The House of Elders (Meshrano Jirga) with 34 members is elected by regional legislatures for a four year term. The President is elected for a five year term by an absolute majority (securing more than 50 per cent of total votes polled).

The 2009 Presidential election was a landmark event in the history of Afghanistan due to the prevailing unstable situation in the country. The outcome of the elections will have a far reaching effect on the future of Afghanistan that has been struggling to return to the path of democracy and development. This election is the second in the series in nearly eight years since the ouster of the Taliban in 2001. However the security environment in Afghanistan has deteriorated sharply and has also undermined the credibility of the Afghan leadership. Unstable and fragile security situation had created uncertainty about the government's ability to hold elections.

The important aspect of the 2009 election was that it was held under the auspices of the Afghan election authorities, called Independent Election Commission (IEC). This will not only legitimize the elected government and the political system but also help the Afghans for a smooth transition to a credible democratic institution. Besides, the enthusiasm shown by women not only in voters' registration and voting process but the large number of women candidates contesting the election is a significant aspect of the changes taking place in Afghanistan since 2001.

Afghan voters exhibited exemplary courage and determination to strengthen the democratic process, which in the long run would contribute towards peace and stability in the country. It was indeed a difficult task for the international community to encourage Afghan authorities to conduct election to Presidency in the wake of the increasing assault by the Taliban not only in the far flung areas, but also in the high security city of Kabul. The international community's initiative was overwhelmingly supported by the people and the political parties which was demonstrated by the enthusiasm of Afghans on the voting day.

In the build up to the election, the Afghans' support for the electoral process was amply displayed through a nation-wide voters' registration process. Despite the threat from Taliban, more than 14 million Afghans registered including a high number of women voters. More than 40 nominations were filed, but 32 aspirants remained in the fray till the end including women candidates. Despite numerous obstacles, one important and positive element to note is the large scale involvement of the Afghans in managing their own election. This is a very significant aspect of the election considering the state of the affairs which had earlier been prevailing in

the country.

Prominent candidates for this election were Abdullah Abdullah, Ashraf Ghani and President Hamid Karzai. In Afghanistan it is extremely important to involve major regional players (warlords) for a successful and prosperous democratic set up. Whether the international community likes it or not, the influence of regional players in Afghanistan can not be discounted. Many of the candidates participated in election this year have a tainted past and been accused of not only being drug lords but war criminals. In fact Abdul Rashid Dostum, the heavy weight Uzbek leader of Afghanistan, who has been in exile in Turkey, came to Afghanistan just before the election to support Hamid Karzai.

In an uncertain post-election environment in Afghanistan, where as many as 1.5 million ballots, or over a third of the total is alleged to be rigged, the international community needs to act fast to arrest the situation at the earliest. It is necessary to build confidence of the Afghans in the electoral process. If the disputed ballots are not counted this could bring down the percentage of votes for Hamid Karzai and lead to a second round of elections (run-off election). The international community needs to prevail upon the main rivals for another reconciliation and make them stakeholders in the governance of Afghanistan. This will not only give legitimacy to the government, but also strengthen the peoples' faith in the governance. The prevalent situation is fluid and conducive to Taliban's aim to spread hatred among the fragmented Afghan society.

Reconciliation, accommodation and political engagement between the stakeholders in Afghanistan is in the best interest of not only for Afghan people but for the regional peace. India, hopes that the political imbroglio would end at the earliest to the satisfaction of all the stakeholders. This will help tackle the menace of terrorism emanating from Afghanistan.

**Dr. Nihar Ranjan Das is a Research Fellow at Indian Council of World Affairs, Sapru House, New Delhi-110001*