

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind

Daily  
**Outlook**  
AFGHANISTAN  
The Leading Independent Newspaper

January 05, 2019

## Electoral Violence and Democratization Process in Afghanistan

**E**lections remain a stabilization factor in any democratic society. It is an important component of any transition process, especially from one civilian administration to the other. Therefore, it is almost impossible to talk about democracy without making implicit reference to elections. Summarily, elections constitute the body, soul and spirit of democracy. But how credible and peaceful an election is; determines its democratic measurement.

Historically, violence has almost always featured prominently in all electoral processes in Afghanistan but its frequency and magnitude of occurrence in the country since the return of the country to democratic rule in 2001 have assumed a catastrophic dimension, particularly, in 2014 and 2018, thus; threatening the democratization process in the country.

Afghan citizens went to the polls on Saturday 20 October 2018 to elect members of the House of the People. Contrary to the expectations, the election was one of the most unorganized, fraudulent and unfair in the country electoral history. According to experts, despite the heavy investment in the fraud-proof voting technology, reports of politically motivated killings and the ruthless man-handling of civilians during political campaigns and rallies in some provinces indicated that elections are still perceived as a "door die" affair in the country. Conducting free, fair and credible elections in Afghanistan is undoubtedly a big challenge, because the "political players" are not ready to play the game according to rules. This is even worst as there are no severe sanctions for perpetrators of electoral misconducts and violence.

However, some factors are traced to occurrence of electoral violence in Afghanistan. It is poverty, unemployment, ineffectiveness of security forces and culture of impurity by government, illiteracy, zero-sum politics, poor handling of elections by the electoral commission, poor handling of election petitions, lack of internal party democracy, corruption among electoral officials, unresolved ethnic differences, democratic deficit, internal conflicts within the main rival parties, ethnic groups and unemployment among youths among others.

In Afghanistan, electoral violence is made possible because the political system supported zero-sum politics, as the winning team considers the losing teams stiff opponent who has nothing to offer to the winning party, which eventually forms government. This however has led to conclude that electoral violence is visible as a result of the structural and attitudinal imbalance in the Afghan society on the part of political leaders. However, the democratization process in the country is threatened as a result of the manipulation and subversion of peoples will which often leads to violence.

Afghanistan's electoral management bodies are not strong enough to withstand the pressure exerted by the political system and the electoral misconducts that accompanies it continues to threaten the deepening of democratization process. The negative effects of electoral violence in the country continue to reduce the citizens' confidence in the democratic process as well as heighten the fears of possible democratic collapse.

However, the current status of elections in Afghanistan calls for studying and examining the implications of electoral violence on democratization process, with particular reference to 2014 and 2018 general elections in Afghanistan and how the country can manage the electoral process without much threat to the democratic stability. With considerable negative effects of electoral violence on the political system, therefore proffer recommendations on how electoral related violence can be reduced as well as controlled shall be taken seriously. Such studies however will constitute additional literature to existing body of knowledge in the area of democratization. They will also form relevant data bank for policy makers, election management body, academics and the general reading public.

Studying the electoral violence and its implications on democratization process in Afghanistan, with focusing on previous general elections is necessary to overcome the overriding electoral challenges in the country. Elections in Afghanistan have nearly always created an atmosphere of uncertainty and tensions as a result of undemocratic roles played by politicians. Afghanistan's most valuable asset remains not its mineral resources but its resourceful and diverse people. Peaceful, credible and transparent elections could be the first step to the responsible and transparent government that Afghans deserve.



## Afghans' Fluctuation between Hope and Fear

By: Hujjatullah Zia

**D**ebated hotly, peace talks seem a gleam of hope for Afghanistan in 2019. Afghans, who left a deadly year behind, desire that warring factions will reach a consensus with Kabul government and its international allies on the peace table. Despite the fact that peace talks made the national and international headlines within several years in the past without a tangible result, Afghans still hope peace will resurface through negotiations. Not to mention the soldiers' casualties, the heavy sacrifices paid by Afghan civilians within the past decade and so are indescribable. Afghans suffered untold sorrow and their rights and freedoms were trampled upon in the worst possible way. Terrorist networks, mainly the Taliban, violated humanitarian law flagrantly across the country. That is, they carried out indiscriminate attacks against people with not enough concerns shown by international community. Similarly, the Taliban spilt the blood of people under the guise of Islamic State so as to escape the public shaming. Years of war and violence inflicted much pain and sufferings upon Afghan men and women. Now even though peace remains as a dream-never-come-true for Afghan individuals, hope and pray for peace and prosperity linger among the nation.

With the ongoing heated discussions regarding peace talks, a number of Afghans tend to believe that peace will be a dream come true for the country.

On the other hand, however, many individuals, including political analysts, are of the view that the Taliban seek to risk nothing for the peace talks as they bargain for political advantages. "The prospects for political reconciliation in Afghanistan is largely unpromising, despite some progresses have been made. Political reconciliation would die out, if military means could succeed in settling Afghan issue, no matter who wins the game," said Dr. Zeng Xiangyu, scholar in Institute of South Asian Studies at Sichuan University, in his article titled "Political Reconciliation: Prospects". He believes that with the unmitigated insurgency, peace will remain elusive. According to him, the Taliban will come to negotiating table with less expectation if they are weakened in the battlefields. But if the Taliban gain upper hand in battlefields, they will haggle over high political price, which will not be acceptable for Kabul government. Thus, the fruition of peace talks will be an unlikely scenario.

To corner the Taliban and pressure them for meaningful peace

talks, Kabul government and its international allies have to intensify their attacks against them. If the Taliban are not weakened militarily, they will hardly come to table with genuine intention. Moreover, if the negotiating sides fail to reach a consensus and resolve their issues through a peaceful political settlement, the deadlock seems to resurface. "Another possibility is that both sides fall in a deadlock where each side expect a breakthrough by a coup de grace," Zeng said.

The fact is that the Taliban are not logical negotiators, which leaves little room for public hope and optimism. For instance, the Taliban signaled for reconciliation through talks in the past as Kabul and the Taliban representatives held face-to-face talks on 7 July 2015 in Murree, near Islamabad. But the Murree talks, which were stalled by the news of Mullah Omar's death, did not bear the desired result. Therefore, a number of Afghans are not much hopeful about meaningful talks.

Overall, the fluctuation between hope and fear continues as the US has put all its weight behind the talks. If the talks between US and the Taliban do not lead to peace in Afghanistan, the re-emergence of deadlock in talks is a strong possibility.

But the engagement of different regional stakeholders in the talks such as Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirate, besides Pakistan, sparks off more hope for the US.

After all, Iran has also signaled for engaging in the talks after being accused of supporting the Taliban. Iran tends to show that it will practice upon the principle of good neighborliness. It has yet to prove it.

Likewise, China has already shown its sincerity through its engagement for peace talks as she has been a member of Quadri-lateral Coordination Group. China has also organized the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan ministerial dialogue, the second round of which was held in Kabul few days ago. The engagement of regional stakeholders in peace talks is highly comprehensive by now, which creates some hope for the public. Whether or not the talks result in peace, the time will decide.

Afghans, who have borne the brunt of terrorism and insurgency, have no choice other than hoping for peace and stability in every New Year. It is hoped the year 2019 will be void of violence.

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## The Needs for Fundamental Reforms in Election Commissions

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**I**t is true that elections are not the only principle for democracy, but are the main way for the implementation of democracy. Democracy is misshaped without election. The principle of representation in democracy considers it as indisputable requirement. As it is not possible to represent the people with appointment, neither it is possible to practice democracy with permanent representation. The repeated failures in holding elections have seriously undermined the democratization process in Afghanistan. The Afghan parliamentary election has been delayed for more than three years and still it is in an ambiguous fate. The legal term of Provincial Council is also going to be over. The legal working period of some senators has also come to an end. Failure to hold district council's election has completely divested possibility of holding the legal loya jirga. After the formation of the National Unity Government holding the Loya Jirga was required but due to the lack of district councils, the Loya Jirga was not held and the term of national unity has expired with the composition of the Executive Directorate. Thus, the constitutional provisions regarding timely holding of provincial councils and presidential elections were never carried out in accordance with the law. The legal gap of the Provincial Council and the Meshrano Jirga may legitimately raise some legal questions regarding illegitimacy of many actions.

Concerning the timely election failure, IEC is the main responsible entity, but not the only one. The disagreement between the political parties and influential institutions on ongoing issues related to the election and the prolongation of the election reform process after the formation of the national unity government was also a part of problems. The hesitation of some of international partners to fund and hold a timely election was one of the other factors. However, after resolving these problems in holding the recent parliamentary election, it was proved that the main problem was the lack of capacity in the Independent Election Commissions of Afghanistan.

In spite of huge expenses, the recent parliamentary election has proven that no major work has taken place in the commission over the past years, and works has been just done as projects. Undoubtedly, if the huge cost of the election processes was properly managed, we would not have been stuck now. With the voting digitization at the last stage of election process no successful results was achieved but wasted a lot of fiscal resources. The biometric process is a technical job but it was not technically decided, and so the technical result was not obtained. In addition, the scans which obtained from voters profiles are lacking the required information and cannot be used in other administrative processes.

Overall, the IEC did not succeed in ensuring transparency. No one think that biometric device could contribute in transparen-

cy of election process comparing to the previous elections and neither could decrease the expenses. Even, many of IEC workers did not know how to turn on the devices, let alone to cover large crowds of people; with witnessing many types of problems, the situation tells us if technology is not used properly, it may double the problems instead of providing a viable solution.

Capacity building is the first step in using technology but the election commissions have not reached this step despite imposing a lot of expenses. IEC officials also confessed the issue with delay of presidential election to improve capacity both in center and provincial levels. The Afghan government, the United States and UNAMA have also welcomed the decision hoping to make necessary reforms in IEC. Foreign institutions and donors as well as the Afghan people, have clearly realized that this commission with existing capacity and structure, would never be able to hold the next year's presidential elections fairly. The Afghan government has denied all other justifications in delaying the presidential elections but only emphasized on the capacity-building factor in election commissions.

Nonetheless, preventing from illness is better than treatment. It is relatively a good decision to get ready instead of launching another poor process. Insisting on holding timely presidential election was right when the goal of legislators were fulfilled. The goal of the legislator is to hold a transparent, free and fair election while this is not possible with the current condition of IEC. In addition, Given the climate condition in Afghanistan, the initial stages for holding presidential election are not feasible in the winter season and it is neither possible for candidates to campaign during this season. While in terms of legal opportunities, the proper and equal bed of participation should be provided equally for all the people. At the time of the constitutional amendment, it should be one of the cases to be corrected.

Anyway, after the announcement of the delay in the presidential election IEC and other related institutions should make serious efforts in proper use of this opportunity to make necessary changes in the election commissions. In addition to the capacity building program and elimination of unqualified employees from both Central and provincial level is serious need for structural changes in commission. Reforms are not limited to removal and capacity building of just ordinary people. Therefore, it is imperative that reforms are made at the core level of the IEC, and if necessary, these reforms should include the commissions' leadership.

Moreover, changes to the duties and the way of communication and coordination between the IEC units are also necessary. Otherwise, we will not be able to satisfy the election bodies and the international community by making minor improvements. The international community has long argued that they would not financially contribute without necessary reforms in the Afghan election commissions.

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