

In Focus Transatlantic News Digest
An Electronic Newsletter of the Atlantic Council of Canada



#22, September 18, 2009

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Afghan Election Fallout

Leading up to last month's elections, NATO allies hoped that Afghanistan's second experiment in electoral democracy would produce a credible government in Kabul, thus inching Afghanistan towards sustainable self-governance. However, the outcome of the August 20th election process was marred by two overwhelming characteristics: disparities in voter turnout and widespread and highly publicized allegations of fraud.

In some areas of Afghanistan, such as the relatively stable Northern Arc from Herat in the west to Nangarhar in the east, election day turnout is estimated to have been as high as 60%. However, in the more violent southern regions intimidation combined with distrust in the national government led to substantially lower turnouts. For instance, estimates for Helmand province place voter turnout at a dismal 10%-25% with many districts not registering a single vote. While official turnout rates are nearly impossible to determine given that last month's election was not preceded by a national census, it has been surmised that national rates were lower than those produced by the 2005 Afghan presidential elections. In addition to such disparities in voter turnout, the United Nations backed Electoral Complaints Commission is currently investigating over 2,000 reports of voting irregularities and has publicly stated that it has found "clear and convincing evidence of fraud."

Allegations include brazen acts of ballot box stuffing in areas such as Paktika, Kandahar and Ghazni, as well as ineligible voting, ghost voters and fake ballots. In some cases, ballot boxes were already full when polling stations opened, while in other instances the reported number of votes cast were greater than the total number of eligible voters. Abdullah Abdullah has accused the Afghan government and the Afghan-based Independent Election Commission as being complicit in this systemic electoral fraud, while international observers have concluded that fraudulent activity is likely to have taken place at all stages of the election process—registration, voting and counting. The Electoral Complaints Commission has reacted by ordering a recount and forensic audit of 2,516 polling stations that reported abnormally high turnout and/or ballots cast for a single candidate. This number represents roughly 10% of all polling stations and nearly 15% of the preliminary tally. Thus far, all ballots in 5 polling stations have been invalidated and it is expected that more of these "quarantined" stations will meet a similar fate.

With tallying nearly complete, Karzai holds 54.3% of the vote giving him a comfortable lead over Abdullah. However, if Karzai's support falls below the 50% threshold as a result of the ongoing fraud investigation—a process which could take more than a month to complete—Afghanistan would face a runoff election. Analysts have expressed concern that low voter turnout coupled with systemic election fraud could have a destabilizing effect on Afghanistan. Regardless of who ultimately claims victory, a peaceful transition of power will require the losing candidate and his supporters to accept the outcome of the election. If, however, the election results are perceived as illegitimate, it is possible that the democratic process could exacerbate ethnic division between Abdullah's Tajik supporters and Karzai's Pashtun backing. More fundamentally, the depth of the fraud allegations would speak to a government which has failed to abandon a culture of corruption and cronyism. This trend stands in stark contrast to the goal of creating long-term, stable governance in Afghanistan and risks creating friction between the newly elected Afghan government and its Western allies.

Yet, The implications of last month's election are not all doom and gloom. One notable bright spot was the minimal occurrence of violence on election day—less than 20 deaths and relatively few rocket attacks. While there may be some truth to the assertion that, rather than being deterred by security measures, the Taliban choose not to launch large scale attacks on polling stations, the fact remains that whereas the 2005 elections took place under the auspices of NATO forces, the Afghan National Police provided the vast majority of security for this round of elections. Furthermore, as observed by Ambassador Jawed Ludin, this election saw the emergence of issue-based, non-ethnic campaign platforms based on ideals such as hope and change. This shift away from overt appeals to ethnic power bases represents progress towards the development of modern political culture in Afghanistan and is a significant benchmark regarding the process of democratization. In any case, given Afghanistan's turbulent history, it ought to be emphasized that Afghan democracy cannot be accurately compared to the processes and institutions of consolidated Western democracy, nor should the presence of fraud or corruption be surprising to onlookers. Much like Afghanistan's notorious Highway 1, the path to Afghan democracy is sure to be a long and bumpy road.

Live links to articles:

[Afghanistan: Will the U.S. Settle for Karzai?](#), [Taliban Claim Victory over Vote](#), [Monthly press conference by Anders Fogh Rasmussen](#), [Growing Accounts of Fraud Cloud Afghan Election](#), [Afghanistan in Political Purgatory](#), [A Litany of Grievances](#), [Afghan Recount Presents Huge Task](#), [More Votes than Voters](#), [Kandahar – Globe and Mail Update](#), [A Row Over Alleged Fraud in the Afghan Election](#), [David Miliband – Afghan Elections could not be called 'Free and Fair'](#), [Afghan Fraud Ballots Invalidated](#), [Flaws Overshadow Afghan Outcome](#).

NATO Countries Prepare for Afghan Pullout

The deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan coupled with the countries fraud-laced elections has once again spurred talk among NATO allies regarding massive troop pullouts, particularly from the Netherlands, Canada and Germany. Each country has expressed their commitment to end their missions, beginning in 2010 for the Dutch, 2011 for Canada and now 2013 for Germany. This scenario only adds to the troubles of U.S. President Barack Obama who is likely to face enormous backlash from his own democratic colleagues on whether to add to the additional 68,000 troops he has already ordered to Afghanistan. New polls indicate that support for the war in Afghanistan

amongst Americans has reached its lowest point since the start of the conflict in 2001. 58% of respondents say they now oppose the war, and only 23% of democrats support it. Consequently, the White House has chosen to postpone any major decisions on troop levels until it can adequately gauge the potential repercussions of doing so.

Meanwhile, Obama cannot expect much support from NATO allies. On Monday, prior to Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Wednesday meeting with Obama in Washington, a spokesperson reiterated Canada's commitment to terminate its combat mission in 2011. In addition, growing public opposition to the mission has recently be verbalized by Liberal Senator Colin Kenny, whose pointed article entitled "Retreat!" argued that Canada was not going to win the war and that history suggests it is best to disengage from the country. Despite this atmosphere and its consequences on Obama's strategy, Obama is not expected to ask Harper directly to reconsider the deadline. Instead, he will likely make the pitch using surrogates such as the NATO Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen or the U.S. Permanent Representative to NATO, Mr. Ivo Daalder.

Mr. Fogh Rasmussen himself recently drew fire from Ottawa after blatantly asking Canada to stay in Afghanistan past 2011. He also chided those nations speaking of pulling out, saying such threats will only further destabilize the region. Rasmussen aides have meanwhile denied that his recent cancellation of a planned visit to Ottawa was influenced by this. In fact, it is more likely that he forwent the visit as he joined the efforts aimed at convincing Holland to extend its mission beyond 2010.

The Dutch, who currently have 1,700 troops in Uruzgan, have confirmed that they will terminate their leading role in the volatile southern region. Recent comments by Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende's, however, indicate that the Netherlands will 'not turn its back' on Afghanistan and may continue in a training capacity. This comes after Mr. Daalder himself made a more forceful pitch for the Netherlands to stay while on a visit to the Hague.

Germany, however, has also verbalized its desire to end its mission. Many see this as a result of a major attack ordered by German commanders which killed dozens of Afghan civilians, an error which only added fuel to the high levels of public discontent with Germany's mission. In a leaked memo, Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier announced a 10-point proposal to withdraw Germany's 4,200 troops by 2013. Although Germany has long been apprehensive about its mission in Afghanistan, this marks the first true indication of a firm deadline for withdrawal.

Despite this, all three countries have left open the possibility that they will continue to provide trainers and humanitarian personnel in the regions once their troops withdraw. In the meantime, the European Union, spearheaded by Britain, France and Germany has called for an international conference to discuss ways to get Afghanistan to take greater responsibility for its security. Only this, many argue, will truly enable foreign troops to exit responsibly.

Live links to articles: [Poll: Support for Afghan war at all-time low](#), [Analysis: White House postponing hard calls on war](#), [NATO secretary general cancels trip to Ottawa](#), [Harper's U.S. problem](#), [Canadian PM say's he won't extend Afghan mission](#), [Retreat!](#), [Netherlands to Stay Longer in Afghanistan](#), [Europeans Seek to Shift Security Role to Afghan Government](#), [The End of Innocence in Afghanistan: The Air Strike Has Changed Everything](#), [The World from Berlin: Afghanistan Withdrawal Plan 'Breaks Through a Conspiracy of Silence'](#), [Germany looking for a way out of Afghan mission](#), [NATO secretary general cancels trip to Ottawa](#), [Germany aims for Afghan pull-out in 2013](#), [Obama Faces Doubts From Democrats on Afghanistan](#).

Recommended Readings

Obama Scraps European Missile Shield Plan, US to scrap missile defence plan

Washington Post, September 17, 2009 & Al Jazeera English Online, August 15, 2009

President Obama has come through on a campaign pledge to review and terminate the controversial US missile defence shield in Europe. Citing new intelligence showing that Iran's long-range missile program is not yet mature, as well as continuing efforts to mend relations with Russia, Obama announced that he would accept the "unanimous" recommendation from his secretary of defence and chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff to abandon the program.

In its place, the US will deploy the arguably less expressive but equally effective sea-based Aegis missile defence system, which Obama stated would provide "stronger, smarter and swifter defense of American forces and America's allies."

For its part, Russia welcomed the move, however, will wait to fully review the proposal before officially commenting. In the meantime, the Prime Minister of Poland and the Czech Republic have been notified of the decision. One former Czech prime minister has already said that the news was "bad" for his country, while Poles have expressed anger and fear that the decision cements their beliefs that Obama is giving in to the Russians. At the same time, Obama hopes this move will expedite his talks with Russia to reduce both countries' strategic nuclear arms.

Read the full article [here](#) and [here](#).

NATO Appoints first non-American Supreme Commander

Telegraph UK, September 9, 2009.

NATO reached a significant milestone on September 9th with the appointment of French Air Force General Stephane Abrial to the position of Supreme Allied Commander. This appointment marks the first time in NATO's history that this post has been held by a non-American. During a ceremony in Norfolk Virginia, Abrial acknowledged the symbolic value of this decision by stating that his appointment illustrates "the importance of France within the (NATO) alliance." This appointment follows the naming of French General Philippe Stolz to Commander of Allied Joint Command Lisbon: both decisions reaffirming France's re-entry into NATO's military apparatus after a four decade long hiatus. Citing the fact that France is one of NATO's largest contributors of troops, President Nicolas Sarkozy ended France's semi-detachment from NATO last March, arguing that such an arrangement was largely counterproductive. Gen Abrial succeeds James Mattis, a Marine General who is also the current commander of US Joint Forces Command.

Read the full article [here](#).

Sources: International Herald Tribune, Spiegel International Online, BBC News, CNN, The Economist, The Washington Post, Telegraph, Globe and Mail, Time, New York Times, National Post, Ottawa Citizen, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Al Jazeera English, The Toronto Star, Irish Times, CTV News, Google/Canadian Press, The Montreal Gazette, NIS News.

We would like to know your opinion. Please, [email us](#) with your comments and suggestions!

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