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Anger in Afghanistan

in [RAHIMULLAH YUSUFZAI](#) by [Admin](#) — 10 November , 2010 at 5:23 pm | [View Comments](#)

Afghanistan has been a long story of suffering. A new crisis emerges before the old ones are resolved. The controversy surrounding the recent parliamentary election amid concerns about its fairness could lead to another crisis if not handled properly.

The results of every election held in Afghanistan in recent years have been contested due to allegations of rigging and fraud. The September 18 poll for the Wolesi Jirga (National Assembly) was no exception. However, the expected ethnic imbalance in the assembly as a result of gains by non-Pashtuns such as the Hazaras at the expense of the Pashtuns who couldn't vote in large numbers due to Taliban threats could add one more destabilising factor to an already troubled situation in Afghanistan. .

The delay in finalising and announcing the results of the parliamentary vote has been causing concern in Afghanistan, but for the first time now demands are being made for holding the poll again. Such demands would grow louder once the final results are announced. The protests became frequent once preliminary results were leaked and candidates began to know if they were going to win or lose.

Rigged polls and a controversial outcome in any country would cause unrest and weaken democracy. In war-ravaged and unstable Afghanistan though, the consequences of rigging and doubtful results could cause greater harm as the loss of trust in the electoral process and the democratic institutions would strengthen the hands of those seeking a violent change in the country.

In a multi-ethnic state such as Afghanistan, an election outcome in which one or the other ethnic group gains a representation in parliament greater than its population share due to factors beyond the control of the government could spell even more trouble. Reports suggesting that candidates from the ethnic Hazara community, which is Shia living mostly in Afghanistan's central highlands, could win more than 50 seats in the 249-seat lower house of parliament won't go unchallenged.

There has never been a proper census in the country but the share of the Hazaras in

Afghanistan's estimated population of 30 million is believed to be a minimum 10 per cent and a maximum 15. Getting over 50 seats would give greater (about 20 per cent) representation to the Hazaras in parliament than their due share and empower an ethnic minority that has long been oppressed in Afghanistan. But its empowerment would come at the expense of the majority Pashtuns, who founded the modern Afghan state and have been dominating power in the country and at times even oppressing the Hazaras.

The ethnic imbalance in the representation in the national assembly would be felt in all provinces with a mixed population, more so in Ghazni, Wardak, Urozgan etc where the Hazaras live in significant numbers along with the Pashtuns. As the Taliban have a stronger presence in the Pashtun-populated areas, they used both force and persuasion to ensure boycott of the parliamentary vote in those areas.

The poor turnout in Pashtun-inhabited areas in these provinces meant that Pashtun candidates had lesser chances of making it to the assembly compared to non-Pashtuns. Relative peace in areas populated by non-Pashtuns ensured a higher turnout and more votes for candidates belonging to their communities. For example in Ghazni province, where Pashtuns are a majority and the Hazaras a close second in terms of numbers, all 11 parliamentary seats according to preliminary results have been won by Hazara candidates. The Pashtuns would thus have no representation in the assembly from Ghazni. This would certainly cause anger and unrest.

Pashtun candidates and tribal elders are demanding a re-run not only in Ghazni but also other provinces. Prior to the parliamentary poll, the government and the election commission were claiming that polling would be held all over the country except in the most insecure six districts. But it later turned out that 15 districts were insecure and largely unable to hold the poll. In Ghazni, eight districts were insecure and all were Pashtun-populated.

Under the law, the parliamentary poll cannot be held again, but ensuring national cohesion and preventing ethnic strife should override other considerations. Hamid Karzai, who was chosen by the US and other Western powers to become president in the post-Taliban period primarily due to the fact that he belonged to the majority Pashtun ethnic group, has also spoken in favour of a re-run in Ghazni for the sake of national unity. He is aware of the implications of not giving adequate representation to the Pashtuns in the national assembly as it could push them further into the Taliban camp.

Already, Afghanistan's national army is faced with an ethnic imbalance in its composition. The Pashtuns are under-represented and their lack of representation is more acute in the

southern provinces where the Taliban have a stronger presence. The Pashtun representation is also stated to be less than their share of population in other national institutions. This is causing ill-will and is a cause of instability. Due to insecurity, reconstruction and development cannot take place in Taliban-influenced Pashtun areas, which incidentally suffered more damage both during the Soviet occupation and following the US invasion of Afghanistan.

Seven weeks have passed since the poll was held and the final results were due at the end of October. The outcome would not be made public officially for some time due to the delay in deciding the fate of thousands of complaints regarding rigging and election malpractices made by the candidates to the UN-backed electoral watchdog body. Talk of fraudulent practices in the poll has become loud and consistent in recent weeks and even the top UN envoy to Afghanistan, Staffan de Mistura was quoted as saying that "considerable fraud" had taken place.

The loudest criticism has obviously come from candidates facing defeat. The country's election commission, which insists on calling itself 'independent' despite its poor track record, has already declared invalid a quarter of the polled votes. If valid, those ballots would have made considerable difference to the outcome of the poll in many provinces. This decision was hailed by some quarters as evidence of the growing decision-making powers of the election commission, but many candidates cried foul and claimed that it was partial as it favoured certain people and resulted in their victory. It also eroded the credibility of the poll as up to 25 per cent of the polled votes were struck down as invalid.

A number of candidates in the election and their supporters have been holding protest rallies in Kabul and elsewhere in the country. In Kabul, a vigil outside the gates of President Hamid Karzai's presidential palace is often part of the protest in the hope that their pleas would be heard. The protestors have been condemning the poll as illegal and undemocratic and demanding new election in a year's time. There are growing claims that the poll was full of fraud and the results were unacceptable.

The likely winners, however, think otherwise as they insist the poll was free and fair. In their view, the losers never accept the results, more so in a country like Afghanistan where democracy is in its infancy and elections are a new phenomenon. However, international observers and analysts were far from satisfied with the way the election was conducted. The absence of political parties in Afghanistan is a major reason for the weak democratic system and lack of discipline in parliament. The use of force, money and the ethnic card are

presently the deciding factors in influencing the country's politics and elections.

The election for president in August 2009 that Karzai eventually won was also declared fraudulent. President Karzai's credibility suffered as a result of that poll in which a third of the ballots were adjudged fake. It also widened the gulf between him and his Western supporters. The mounting criticism that the September 2010 parliamentary poll was also largely fraudulent has raised serious questions about Afghanistan's preparedness to embrace democracy when it is suffering from an insurgency and lawlessness.