



### ELECTIONS IN AFGHANISTAN: AN UNCERTAIN OUTCOME

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



**On September 28, 2019, Afghanistan witnessed its fourth Presidential elections since the ouster of the Taliban in 2001. It was hoped that elections would reflect how far Afghanistan as a country had come in its democratic processes and aspirations. Unlike the past, it was further envisaged that the elections would pave the way for a strong and stable Afghanistan, demonstrate the dynamics of a growing democracy, and lead to further developments in the ongoing peace process with the Afghan Taliban. However, those hopes appear to have been dimmed considering the fact that even after two months since balloting, there is no clear winner in sight.**

Although new and improved mechanisms were introduced in this year's elections, including the deployment of more than 70,000 ANSF personnel (including the police, army and intelligence officials<sup>1</sup>) and biometric verification to avoid voter fraud, the 2019 elections are reminiscent of the last elections held in 2014. Like the previous elections, the polls of 2019 were marred with major disappointments ranging from insecurity and violence, low voter turnout, electoral discrepancies, political feuds, and deep ethnic and political divides at multiple levels. Hence, 2019 showed how little had changed politically in Afghanistan. Even the outcome, and how the major political stakeholders reacted in the immediate aftermath of the voting, has reflected weaknesses in the

<sup>1</sup> Emma Graham Harrison, "Abdullah Abdullah hoping third time's a charm in Afghan vote," *The Guardian*, September 27, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/27/afghanistan-presidential-election-abdullah-abdullah-ashraf-ghani>

process. Even in the elections of 2014, majority of the candidates, especially frontrunner Abdullah Abdullah, raised legitimate concerns regarding the transparency of the election process.

The Independent Election Commission (IEC) of Afghanistan had said that the initial results would be declared on October 17 and final results on November 7. However, with no clear winner, the IEC stated on November 2, 2019, that there would be a recount of votes in all 34 provinces of the country by November 14.<sup>2</sup> While the commission has failed to meet the deadline, citing technical problems as the cause of delay,<sup>3</sup> recounting continues. While no set date has been fixed to announce the final results from the recount, the process has been completed. Opposition candidates have already threatened to discard presidential election results (based on fraud) announced by the IEC body whom they have lost confidence in.<sup>4</sup> Hence, in such circumstances, it appears that elections will have to enter into a second round of voting to determine a clear winner.<sup>5</sup> Apart from serious doubts regarding the results, the opposition has also called for interim set up.<sup>6</sup>

Although a total of 17 candidates took part in the elections, namely Ashraf Ghani, Abdullah Abdullah, Rahmatullah Nabil, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Ahmad Wali Massud, Nur ul-Haq Ulumi, Latif Pedram, Nurullah Jalili, Hakim Tursan, Mohammad Ibrahim Alekozai, Faramarz Tamana, Ghulam Faruq Nejrabi, Nur Rahman Liwal, Mohammad Shahab Hakimi, and Enayatullah Hafiz,<sup>7</sup> the competition has primarily been between the two major frontrunners, namely Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah. While both candidates were quick to claim victory, ruling out any chances of a power sharing set up like before<sup>8</sup>, it appears that a re-election or runoff will be the only way to settle the issue.

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<sup>2</sup> Anisa Shaheed, "Election Commission to Start Recounting Votes," *Tolo News*, November 3, 2019, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/election-commission-start-recounting-votes>

<sup>3</sup> "Result of Afghan presidential vote postponed again: election commission," *Reuters*, November 13, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-election/result-of-afghan-presidential-vote-postponed-again-election-commission-idUSKBN1XN1E2>

<sup>4</sup> Khalid Nekzad, "Presidential Candidates: We Won't Accept Election Result," *Tolo News*, November 21, 2019, <https://tolonews.com/elections-2019/presidential-candidates-we-won%E2%80%99t-accept-election-result>

<sup>5</sup> Shahid Khan Saif, "Afghanistan: Recount in key presidential polls resumes," *Anadolu Agency*, November 17, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/afghanistan-recount-in-key-presidential-polls-resumes/1647974>

<sup>6</sup> "Hekmatyar Calls for Interim Gov't to Organize 'Runoff Voting,'" *Ariana News*, October 20, 2019, <https://ariananews.af/hekmatyar-calls-for-interim-govt-to-organize-runoff-voting/>

<sup>7</sup> Frud Bezhan, "Who's Who Among The Afghan Presidential Candidates", *Radio Free Europe /Radio Liberty*, September 27, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghan-presidential-election-candidates/30102105.html>

<sup>8</sup> "RFE/RL Interview: Ghani Rules Out Another Afghan Unity Government," *Radio Free Europe /Radio Liberty* September 26, 2019, <https://pressroom.rferl.org/a/rfe-rl-interview-ghani-rules-out-new-unity-government-in-afghanistan/30187733.html> Emma Graham-Harrison, "Abdullah Abdullah hoping third time's a charm in Afghan vote", *The Guardian*, September 27, 2019,

Moreover, the elections took place in an atmosphere of uncertainty and were nearly postponed due to the ongoing peace talks between the US and the Taliban. In early September, it appeared that a political settlement was in sight following the 9th round of direct talks between the US and the Taliban in Doha on September 2, 2019, when Zalmay Khalilzad, the US Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation had declared that the US and Taliban had, "an agreement in principle". However, the rather abrupt declaration from President Trump on September 7, 2019 declaring the talks 'dead' dampened any hopes of a political settlement with the Taliban. However, the derailment of talks did lead to the holding of elections on its scheduled date, but with an exceptionally low voter turnout of only 2.2 million of the 9 million registered voters casting their votes.<sup>9</sup> The Taliban made no secret of their opposition towards the elections, terming it as a 'sham' and threatened to target the election as a whole. Despite the threats, the group conducted one major attack in Kandahar and 400 smaller-scale acts of violence.<sup>10</sup>

Beyond domestic politics, the lack of stability, the uncertainty, and the ruptures in the Afghan political process also have repercussions on the international front. The situation in Afghanistan due to the elections means that the peace process and further talks in Beijing appear to have been put on hold, at least temporarily. All of this makes the future of Afghanistan even more uncertain, and certainly shows that there is a long way to go before the country can claim to have developed democratic processes that will play a part in its development. The longer the process takes, longer the future of Afghanistan will be on hold, particularly regarding the peace process and the future government.<sup>11</sup>

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/27/afghanistan-presidential-election-abdullah-abdullah-ashraf-ghani>

<sup>9</sup> Susannah George and Pamela Constable, "Dismal turnout in Afghan election could weaken next government," *Washington Post*, September 29, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/dismal-turnout-in-afghan-election-could-leave-government-in-even-weaker-position/2019/09/29/130b97a4-e2b9-11e9-a6e8-8759c5c7f608\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/dismal-turnout-in-afghan-election-could-leave-government-in-even-weaker-position/2019/09/29/130b97a4-e2b9-11e9-a6e8-8759c5c7f608_story.html)

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Ruttig and Jelena Bjelica, "Afghanistan's 2019 Election (11): A first look at how E-Day went," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 28 September 2019, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/afghanistans-2019-election-10-a-first-look-at-how-e-day-went/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/afghan-elections-bring-no-peace>