

## AFGHAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS AUGUST 2009

*Amina Khan\**

Among the various challenges that continue to confront Afghanistan, governance has and continues to be a major challenge. The country continues to be confronted by a weak, ineffective and corrupt government. Commonly referred to as the 'mayor of Kabul' for his inability to establish the writ of the government and deliver, Karzai and his government have failed to win the loyalty and trust of the Afghan people. In fact Karzai's lack of performance and inability to reach out to the Afghan people has brought the once unpopular and ousted Taliban back to fill in the vacuum created by Karzai's inability to deliver. As an International Crisis Group report pointed out, 'President Karzai's government still lacks the political will to tackle a culture of impunity and to end political interference in the appointment and operations of police'<sup>1</sup>.

Karzai, has been unsuccessful in providing security or good governance. Over the passage of time, there has been growing dissatisfaction – and resentment towards Karzai. Support has plummeted; both domestic and International criticism has increased regarding the Afghan governments policies on human rights and its lack of good governance and corruption. In an interview to *The BBC* in March 2009, the Afghan finance minister, Anwar ul haq Ahadi, said that the 'US allowed corruption to take place in the Afghan government'. Referring to President Karzai, Ahadi opined that President Karzai continuously refuted any responsibility for corruption. Once in power, Karzai gave senior police posts to former warlords and human rights abusers. A series of investigations have revealed that many in the Karzai administration, including his brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, have been involved in the country's opium trade which accounts for more than 90% of the worlds opium supply.

Although Karzai has remained the US's best option in Afghanistan since the ouster of the Taliban in 2001, clearly he has not been able to govern. According to a survey, carried out by *ABC News, the BBC and ARD German TV* in collaboration with the Afghan Center for Socio-Economic and Opinion Research, support for Karzai has declined from 83 per cent in 2005 to 52 per cent in 2008, while support for the government has also plummeted from 80 per cent in 2005 to 49 per cent in 2008<sup>2</sup>.

Despite the fact that Karzai enjoyed particularly good relations with the previous Bush administration, the new US administration under President Obama has been less forthcoming and more critical towards Karzai. Although President Karzai, termed the inauguration of President Barack Obama as the start of a 'promising new era of understanding between Afghanistan and the US',<sup>3</sup> relations between Karzai and the new Obama administration commenced on a shaky footing. After assuming office, both President Barack Obama and his Special Envoy for Pakistan and Afghanistan, Richard Holbrooke, were critical of Karzai and his government for being ineffective and corrupt. Speaking to reporters during a prime-time news conference, the first of his presidency in February 2009, President Obama said that 'the Afghan government appeared to be detached from the surrounding community it is supposed to serve.'<sup>4</sup> The NATO Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, followed by voicing concern over Karzai's

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\* *Ms. Amina Khan is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad.*

ability of to deliver. In an interview to the Washington Post on January 17, 2009, he said that Afghanistan's current problems were because of 'too little good governance (and not) too much Taliban'<sup>5</sup>.

In fact since 2007, tensions have been mounting between Karzai and the international community, with the West criticising Karzai's inability to establish the writ of his government, failure to address corruption and clamp in on the growing opium trade. Similarly, Karzai has also been quite critical of US-NATO policies in Afghanistan, holding lack of a coherent strategy, weak international coordination, the failure to build Afghan capacity, and poor conduct in the war particularly the number of civilian casualties caused by US- NATO allies as a result of his inability to govern. Karzai has accused the West of failing to go after the real enemy- al-Qaeda and the Taliban and their sanctuaries and training grounds in neighbouring Pakistan. Karzai has insisted that the US and NATO focus its "war on terror" on militant sanctuaries across the border in Pakistan.<sup>6</sup> At one point, Karzai even warned that Afghanistan would seek new arms deal with Russia and threatened to hold a referendum constraining U.S. and NATO operations<sup>7</sup>.

## **Elections**

The second presidential election in Afghanistan's history (first held in 2004) for which the US has announced to donate 40 million dollars was originally scheduled for April 2009. However, due to the escalating violence, the elections have been postponed to August 20, 2009 with an estimated 16.5 million people registered to vote this year. <sup>8</sup> Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun from the Popalzai tribe and member of Afghanistan's largest ethnic group, has governed Afghanistan since 2001. In 2004, Karzai won the first presidential poll in Afghanistan's history. With rampant corruption and thriving opium, it is estimated that about 85 percent of Afghans propose to vote for someone other than Karzai<sup>9</sup>.

With the Taliban boycotting the elections they term 'a sham', and pledging to increase attacks, the months leading to the elections will be critical and decisive for Karzai's re-election. It is no secret that and the international community and the US in particular, backed President Karzai in the 2004 elections. The critical question today is whether the international community will extend their support to Karzai for a second term and whether they have a better alternative to Karzai. Initially, with strong criticism coming from the international community it appeared that there was far less support for Karzai. It appeared that Obama unlike Bush would not depend upon Karzai alone and that a possible search was on for a new Afghan President.

However, despite Karzai's poor performance and growing unpopularity at home and abroad, he does remain the strongest candidate in the country- if not for his competence but for his experience and familiarity; he has been at the helm of affairs since the ouster of the Taliban in 2001. Hence keeping in mind the state of affairs in Afghanistan and the fact that the international community has invested so heavily in Karzai, he is most likely to get a second term. Therefore, Obama may not have an alternative but to accept Karzai for a second term and work with him by putting pressure on him to deliver with accountability. In fact, this changed (yet some what discreet) US stance towards Karzai was first made evident by Richard Holbrooke, who

expressed that the US would neither support nor oppose any candidate<sup>10</sup>. However, the trilateral meeting between President Obama, Karzai and Asif Ali Zardari in May, 2009, saw an abrupt end to US criticism of Karzai.

Head of Afghanistan's election commission, Azizullah Lodin, while announcing the final list of 41 candidates on June 12, 2009 said that most of the candidates running for the presidential seat were not eligible – as many of the candidates are illiterate, lack professional knowledge and hold dual citizenship- which is unacceptable under the Afghan constitution as it clearly states that 'presidential candidates must only hold citizenship in Afghanistan and not be a dual citizen'.

The 41 candidates include Al haj Rahim Jan Sherzad, Mohamad Yaseen, Mohamad Sarwar Ahmedzai, Engineer Moin-uddin Ufatahi , Habib Mangal, ZabiUllah Ghazi Nooristani, Syed Jalal Karim, Mirwais Yasini Bismillah Sher, Bashmir Ahmed Bezhan, Motasim Billah Mazhabi, former Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani Ahmedzai, Abdul Latif Pedram, Shahnawaz Tanai, Dr Mohammad Nasir Anees, Mullah Abdul salaam Rokiti, Zia ul Haq Hafizi, Mohammad Akbar Huria, Baz Mohammad Kufi, Sangeen Mohammad Rehmani, Mehboob-ullah Koshani, Mohammad Hakim Torsun , Abdul Haseeb Arian, Mullah Ghulam Mohammad, Ramazan Bashar Dost, Mualvi Mohammad Syed Hashmi, Abdul Majeed, Nasrullah Baryali, Al-haj Shah Mehmood Popal, Shela Attah, Prof/ Dr. Ghulam Farooq, Al-haj Abdul Ghafoor, Mohammad Hashim Tofeeki, Alhaj Hassan Ali, Maulana Abdul Qadir Imami Ghauri, former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, Dr Frozan, Abdul Jabar Sabit, Hidayat Amin Arsala and Gul Ahmed Yama<sup>11</sup>. However, Karzai's main contenders include former Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani and former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah.

Allegations have surfaced regarding Karzai trying to win people off, as the former Afghan foreign minister and presidential candidate, Abdullah Abdullah in an interview to the *AFP* on May 30, 2009, accused president Karzai of offering him the post of secretary general if he withdrew from the August 20 election. Yet despite such allegations, Karzai clearly seems to be leading and most likely will get a second term. In April 2009, Mohammad Qasim Fahim, key founder of the National Front and from the country's second largest Tajik ethnic group, announced support for Karzai. A former warlord, accused of human rights violations and war crimes by several rights groups and western diplomats, has in return, been chosen as Karzai's first vice president. Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission in April, 2009, said warlords and those who have committed rights violations in the past 30 years should be barred from running either for president or the two deputy posts. Similarly, the two key Afghan opposition groups, headed by Hazara and Uzbek ethnic minorities; the Hezb-i-Wahdat party headed by Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq; and the Junbish-i-Melli party founded by ethnic Uzbek General Abdul Rashid Dostum and headed by Sayed Noorullah, pledged to support Hamid Karzai in the upcoming presidential election, furthering his chance of victory.

However, it remains to be seen whether Karzai will retain the powers he had, as there has been talk of the possible creation of a new chief executive or prime ministerial post, primarily for a division of responsibilities, between the central and local powers. Under this new arrangement money will be diverted from the central government in Kabul to the provinces. The main objective of such a move is to have someone reliable

who can watch over Karzai and be accountable to both the Afghans as well as the international community. Although no names have been announced, Mohammed Hanif Atmar, Afghan interior minister is believed to be the US's likely choice. Afghan presidential hopeful and former foreign minister, Abdullah Abdullah also opined that he would revise Afghanistan's constitution to install a prime ministerial or secretary general post. However, Karzai has criticized the idea, stating that he would resist any dilution of power, and accused an unnamed foreign government of trying to weaken the central government in Kabul. He declared that Afghanistan would never be a puppet state. Speaking to reporters in June 2009, president Karzi's spokesman Humayoun Hamidzada, said that the President had yet to decide on the matter.

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