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Looking **Beyond 2014**: Elections in Afghanistan's Evolving Political Context

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Summary points

- With the continued drawdown of international troops and a presidential election, 2014 will be a crucial year for Afghanistan. However, as the elections approach, there is a need to make policy and programmatic decisions aimed at the longer-term promotion of democracy and good governance in the country.
- While selecting a successor to President Hamid Karzai is paramount in the minds of many Afghans and international observers, it is important to maintain focus on other significant issues closely tied to the electoral process.
- These include the wider historical and regional context of these elections and the overall democratization process; the importance of the simultaneous provincial council elections and potential repercussions on future rounds of voting, particularly in 2015; the impact on younger voters as the country continues to undergo deep demographic shifts; and the potential for both local and national-level upheaval as political actors reposition themselves and restructure patronage networks in response to the outcomes of the elections.
- The potential for the international community to play a continuing role in supporting the promotion of democracy in Afghanistan also remains significant.

Introduction

In April 2014, amid the continued withdrawal of the vast majority of international troops, Afghans will go to the polls to elect a new president and members of the provincial councils. While much of the focus of international donors is on trying to ensure that the elections are as transparent and fraud-free as possible, many in the Afghan political elite are concerned with managing the transition from Hamid Karzai to a new leader and with preserving their own power and patronage networks. But there is also a need to look past these relatively short-term goals, and to consider how these elections fit into Afghanistan's long-term political evolution. Such an approach will help prioritize aspects of the electoral process that can generate meaningful reforms and consolidate those aspects of Afghan political behaviour and institutions that are participatory and stabilizing, rather than focusing only on quick fixes which play well in the media and are politically expedient, but which generate little change.

This paper is the first in a series published by Chatham House on the current transition in Afghanistan. While a companion paper by Carina Perelli and Scott Smith examines current responses to the challenges inherent in conducting elections under difficult circumstances, particularly from fraud and irregularities,¹ this one looks past the 2014 elections to their potential consequences in 2015 and beyond. It argues that in order to continue to encourage democratic politics, both the Afghan government and the international community need to take a long-term approach to policy and programmatic decisions that will allow Afghan citizens to build upon political gains of the past decade, while confronting other democratic shortcomings.

The paper starts by putting the 2014 elections into a broader historical and regional context. It considers how both the imminent provincial council elections and the parliamentary elections in 2015 will reshape the political

landscape. It then examines the issues raised by the extreme demographic shift that Afghanistan is undergoing, the potential for political upheaval as patronage networks are restructured in the wake of the elections, and the role of the international community in supporting democracy.

The ebb and flow of democratization in Afghanistan and the region

Democratization has not taken a straight path in Afghan history. Periods of political liberalization have frequently been followed directly by centralization and brutal repression of any form of opposition. Most notably, Amanullah Khan's drive to liberalize the country socially and politically in the first half of the twentieth century was followed by a reactionary civil war and suppression of the few true forms of opposition to the monarchy among a small Westernizing elite. Similarly, the democratic growth of the Zahir Shah period, which included the establishment of Afghanistan's first parliament and the nascent growth of political parties, was followed by a return to authoritarian rule following a coup by his cousin Daud Khan in 1973. The repression of the Daud era was only heightened by the subsequent communist and Islamist leaders.² The lesson for many in Afghanistan was that attempts at rapid political liberalization can have an adverse effect, leaving all but the most radical activists calling for gradual change, with the result that Afghan expectations about the pace of democratic reform in the country are often much lower than those of outside observers.³

Similarly, it is important to take into account Afghans' experience with earlier rounds of polling in 2004, 2005, 2009 and 2010. These elections, while a step forward for democracy in Afghanistan, allowing a level of participation in national political processes that few in the country had experienced before, were also plagued by corruption. They actively contributed to a sense of political inequality for many citizens who felt their votes were being increasingly manipulated by the Afghan political elite or the

¹ Carina Perelli and Scott Smith, *Anticipating and Responding to Fraud in the 2014 Afghan Elections*, Chatham House, February 2014.

² For more on these cycles in Afghan history see Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Political and Cultural History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 2011.

³ For more on Afghan understandings of democracy and attitudes on democratic reform see Anna Larson, *Toward an Afghan Democracy? Exploring Perceptions of Democratization in Afghanistan* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit – AREU), September 2009.

international community.⁴ Looking towards the 2014 elections, it is clear that political figures in Afghanistan from local brokers to national-level figures have adapted to the electoral systems, learning how electoral structures can be manipulated, votes can be bought and sold, and positions can be secured.⁵ Although both Afghan government institutions and the international donors have learned a good deal from previous elections about how to manage the electoral system in Afghanistan, they have struggled to slow the growing levels of corruption.⁶

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It is also common for Afghans to look to their immediate neighbours in order to assess democratic progress, particularly since these countries will have much to say about the potential for long-term stability in the region. In comparison with these countries, Afghanistan's recent political transition looks much smoother than when it is analysed using Western models. In particular, the political turmoil and lack of respect for election results shown by many key actors in Pakistan over the past decade have done little to convince Afghans that elections are likely to bring them stability. Many also point to the failed protests

following Iran's 2009 presidential elections as further evidence of the challenges for democracy in the region.

While most Afghans still describe the concepts of elections and democracy in favourable terms, evidence from their history and past elections, and the experience of their neighbours, do not necessarily support a correlation in their eyes between democratization, political liberalization and stability.⁷ Electoral support policy and programmes in the country often assume that democratization is a process that can only move in one direction, whereas Afghans and their neighbours have experienced multiple periods of both democratization and de-democratization. As a result, in practice, democratization may not be their primary priority. This has a number of implications for policy and programmatic decisions:

- When donors plan support for democratization projects in Afghanistan, they need to have realistic expectations of what may be achieved and to consider elections in a historical context that acknowledges the struggles for democracy in the region.
- Afghan public opinion about democratic projects will be shaped by the often destabilizing effect of previous attempts at political liberalization, which has left many feeling that democracy is far secondary to security.⁸
- Afghan officials and international donors can learn from other countries either in the region or undergoing similar political transitions as to what has and has not worked in promoting the democratization process.
- Electoral support programmes should not be designed in a vacuum or according to a template, but need to take into account previous policies. Too often programmes are designed for one specific election, only to be scrapped at the end of one election cycle and begun anew the year before the next one.

4 See, for example, Martine van Bijlert, *How to Win an Afghan Election: Perceptions and Practices* (Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network), 11 August 2009.

5 For more on this see Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, *Derailing Democracy in Afghanistan: Elections in an Unstable Political Landscape* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

6 One straightforward example of this is the way in which voter education and outreach material have changed little over the past four elections in Afghanistan and seem likely to change little in 2014, despite the fact that the Afghan political system has evolved significantly and most citizens are aware of the basic electoral procedures. See Nellika Little, 'Beyond Skepticism: Afghan Electoral Outreach Campaigns for 2014 and Beyond', Working Paper (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace), November 2013.

7 Nor do these concepts necessarily correlate in other cases. See Larson, *Toward an Afghan Democracy?*

8 This has been supported by recent rounds of polling done by the Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan.

Looking beyond the presidential elections: voting for the provincial council and parliament

While most international attention has been focused on the presidential contest, locally there is also much discussion of the provincial council elections that will be held simultaneously and that will set the stage for the parliamentary elections, scheduled for 2015. These elections in particular have the possibility to shape the long-term relationship between local communities and the national government, and thus the attitudes of many towards the electoral process and democratization more generally. In part, this is because the provincially based parliamentary elections give voters and communities the opportunity to send representatives to Kabul, providing direct access to lucrative patronage networks and government resources. While provincial council members tend to have lower profiles,⁹ parliamentarians often have the ability to provide real resources and political capital for their followers. At the same time, these figures, particularly those who continue to control militias or are linked indirectly to commanders, may prove key to maintaining stability as international troops leave the country.

Earlier rounds of provincial voting have demonstrated the importance of these elections. For example, in 2009, while most Western officials focused on the role of corruption in the presidential election and then Senator John Kerry travelled to Kabul to persuade Karzai to accept a runoff, many Afghans were more concerned with the outcome of the provincial council elections. This was because most assumed Karzai would easily win any runoff (which the polling numbers seemed to support, even discounting fraudulent ballots). In the meantime, provincial council seats were being won and lost by fewer than a hundred votes, with rampant rumours of local corruption that many had personally witnessed in polling stations. With so much energy being spent on the presidential vote, the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and Electoral Complaints

Commission (ECC) did little to address the concerns of these local polls. As a result, these and the equally flawed parliamentary polls that followed in 2010 shook the confidence of many Afghan voters in the electoral process at least as much as the considerably higher-profile presidential election.¹⁰

Looking ahead, particularly to 2015, there is the likelihood of manipulation and fraud on an immense scale from the local to national levels. Such corruption, however, takes a degree of organization and planning. Many of the networks of political brokers, who were instrumental in the stuffing of ballots in parliamentary elections, were built on networks first established during the 2009 presidential campaigns. In numerous cases, it was not unusual to combine support for presidential candidates with campaigning (legally or illegally) for provincial council candidates. Thus it is likely that any corruption and fraud in 2014 will set the standard and mechanisms for 2015, and will help generate networks that will be used to continue to stuff boxes and engage in other forms of manipulation during the parliamentary elections.

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At the same time, many Afghans will consider a modicum of transparency in 2015 to be crucial for long-term stability. Because the parliamentary elections are provincially based, local instability and even the closing of a few polling stations can determine who wins or

⁹ With exceptions such as Ahmed Wali Karzai in Kandahar until his assassination in July 2011.

¹⁰ For more on this see Chapter 5 of Coburn and Larson, *Derailing Democracy in Afghanistan*.

loses a seat. Similarly, small-scale localized corruption or the threat of key local leaders boycotting the elections may determine the outcome and shape the relationship between the national government and those communities that are and are not successful in having members elected to parliament.¹¹ Add to this the broad range of potential parliamentary candidates, many of whom are commanders or maintain ties to militias, and there is a great threat of local instability following the 2015 elections – especially if instigated by candidates with access to weapons and loyal fighters.

The provincial council and parliamentary elections are likely to be highly contested, not least because the results will affect the ability of communities to access government resources through their local representative. Furthermore, the closing of even a limited number of polling stations can quickly shift the outcome of these provincial-level votes.¹² This is particularly important for more marginalized communities in less secure areas, where people will feel even more disconnected from the national government if they believe their votes are not counted in the provincial-level polls. As a result:

- There is a need to tackle potential fraud and corruption in the provincial council and parliamentary elections with the same vigour as for the presidential election. This has not happened in previous such elections. It requires increased support for Provincial Electoral Complaints Commissions and other province-level electoral support bodies, with an emphasis on transparency, as well as an insistence that decisions are documented and available and that appeals processes are upheld.
- Observer missions should not focus exclusively on the presidential elections and should be encouraged to document irregularities vigorously in both the provincial council and parliamentary elections.

- Continuous funding of the programmes and institutions that support democracy in Afghanistan is needed, beyond simply funding them for single elections. This includes funds for the IEC, ECC and other election watchdogs and civil society groups between and beyond the 2014 and 2015 elections.
- Certain IEC and ECC officials now have significant experience managing elections, but increased training opportunities are needed within Afghanistan and abroad in order to continue to create a body of experienced election officials who can oversee increasingly transparent elections.

Afghanistan's changing demographics

The past decade has seen the growth of a young, educated class expecting jobs and a more transparent political system. These young people are more likely to be urban and to have lived abroad than the generation before them. Despite this, most of the political elites in Afghanistan continue to come from an older generation of leaders. The majority of these leaders rose to prominence during the jihad against the Soviets and those who did not usually have close ties with these groups and the groups involved in the subsequent civil war.

While presidential candidates in this election still come from this older generation, there are incentives for them to reach out to the younger generation, and possibilities for young people to make an impact as candidates in either the provincial council or parliamentary elections. Various political groups organized by young people have made gains in terms of their ability to mobilize – although there is also evidence of older-generation leaders and their political parties attempting to co-opt and limit their influence.¹³ If, however, young people continue to be marginalized, given that over half the population are below the age of 20, the potential exists for significant political upheaval. Both the Afghan government and the

11 For an example from Khost, an area where former parliamentarian Pacha Khan Zadran has significant influence, see Abasin Zaheer, 'Khost Elders Warn of Election Boycott,' *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 14 May 2013.

12 See, for example, the case of Ghazni in 2010, in Thomas Ruttig, *2010 Election (39): Ghazni's Election Drama – It's the System* (amended) (Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network), 2 December 2010.

13 For more on this see Anna Larson and Noah Coburn, *Youth Mobilization and Political Constraints in Afghanistan: The Y Factor* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace), January 2014.

international community need to continue to promote young people's access both to formal political spaces such as political parties and to informal spaces such as athletic and cultural associations in order to relieve some of this political pressure. Therefore, there is a need for:

- Voter registration drives aimed specifically at those who have recently become eligible to vote;
- Funds committed for programmes that open up democratic spaces in which young people can participate;
- Support for media programmes that encourage youth opinions and debate;
- More transparent support to political parties, particularly to those that have internal democratic mechanisms allowing for greater youth participation;
- Diplomatic engagement not simply with the old guard, but with young, emerging political leaders as well.¹⁴

The potential for political upheaval

Even if the elections of 2015 are held in a transparent manner and, in an ideal scenario, a first-round election held according to the constitutional schedule yields a clear winner to replace Karzai, political upheaval is still likely as members of the elite compete for government resources and restructure their patronage networks. In 2009, after Karzai's re-election, there was a period during which he negotiated with political leaders who had been promised key political positions, particularly ministerial posts. Parliament responded in protest by rejecting many of these candidates, and there followed a period of uncertainty during which the president, parliamentarians and other political leaders all competed to reorganize the patronage networks that were fuelled by state resources. Such a period is even more likely to occur in 2014 during the reallocation of ministerial posts and later more local positions, such as provincial and district governorships (all appointed by the executive branch). These negotiations are likely to increase

tensions among political groups and to disrupt much of the work of the government.

Of greater concern is the related potential impact of these elections on the reintegration and reconciliation efforts. While peace talks with the Taliban have made only limited progress, the traction that has been gained could quickly be swept aside by a major shift in the leaders of key government bodies such as the High Peace Council. In order to minimize the post-election upheaval there is a need:

- For the Afghan government to assign positions as quickly and as fairly as possible, emphasizing merit over patronage;
- For donors to continue to fund key government programmes while emphasizing to the Afghan government that this aid must be administered by effective leaders;
- For the international community to continue supporting the reconciliation process on all levels, while the Afghan government strives for continuity in progressing talks.

International support for democracy in Afghanistan

Developing democratically accountable governance is a long-term process, particularly in unstable political environments. The international community has thus far committed significant funds to bolstering democratic processes in Afghanistan, with mixed results. Estimates suggest that the 2009 elections cost \$300 million, a cost borne entirely by international donors, and that between 2002 and 2008, before much of the surge spending, the US government alone spent \$1.8 billion on 'democracy, governance, rule of law and human rights, and elections support'.¹⁵ At the same time, there are growing concerns that elections and other governance projects are reinforcing neo-patrimonial structures dominated by largely unaccountable warlords. This should not sidetrack

¹⁴ The Commonwealth Secretariat has initiated a similar programme of networking for young electoral officials from Commonwealth countries.

¹⁵ Kenneth Katzman, *Afghanistan: Politics, Elections, and Government Performance* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service), November 2009.

the international community's commitment to democracy in Afghanistan or obscure the progress that has been made: most political leaders now seem to accept elections as a means for transferring authority and exercising power, and elections have been a catalyst for opening up political spaces for young people, women and other historically marginalized groups.

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The international community's support for the electoral processes and the government of Afghanistan, however, has been uneven. It has been characterized by unrealistic expectations, bursts of support in the form of short-term funding instead of long-term approaches, inadequate coordination and clumsy political messaging. The ability of the international community to formulate a coherent, coordinated strategy to support democratic institutions in Afghanistan could go a long way in helping to ensure that the elections of 2014 and 2015 contribute to the slow emergence of a more credible electoral regime. A poorly formulated, haphazard strategy will make it increasingly likely that these democratic gains will be lost. Therefore:

- The international community needs to develop short-term priorities, aimed at the elections of 2014 and 2015, which are distinct from medium- to

long-term goals that provide sustained support to electoral institutions and civil society. In particular, it needs to work to capture the promise of shifting demographics by enfranchising young people who are not entrenched in corrupt, neo-patrimonial networks.

- The international community, having spent significant amounts of economic and political capital promoting democracy in Afghanistan, shares much of the responsibility for how democratic institutions in Afghanistan have evolved over the past decade and can continue to shape these institutions in the future if it so chooses.

Conclusion: 2014 and the future of democracy in Afghanistan

By Western standards, a fair and transparent presidential election in 2014 in Afghanistan is unlikely, but even if both this and provincial elections are freer and fairer than recent rounds of voting in Afghanistan, it will not guarantee the continued democratization project in Afghanistan. In contrast, a corrupt process that continues to solidify national-level patronage structures among the elite, rewards fraud and corruption, and further marginalizes the average Afghan voter could set back democracy even further in the country. Elections were one aspect of the intervention that Afghans across the country were generally quick to embrace, with high voter turnout, numerous enthusiastic candidates and even declarations by the Taliban that they would not disrupt initial polling. Since 2004, however, as the declining turnout indicates, Afghans have grown increasingly sceptical of the ability of elections to create real political change. All the forthcoming elections are crucial to ensuring that democratic gains are not wasted and they can be an important step towards a discussion about wider political reform in the country. As such, the international community needs to publicly reaffirm its continued political and financial commitment to this process.

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