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Anticipating and Responding to Fraud in the 2014 Afghan Elections

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Summary points

- The 2014 presidential elections in Afghanistan will be marked by fraud, violence and inconsistency. Since a second round is likely, political turbulence, particularly if the results are contested, may continue until mid-2014 or beyond.
- The elections are, at a minimum, a conflict management mechanism. Judgments as to what is 'legitimate' and 'credible' need to be made not just from a technical perspective.
- The key issue will be the degree to which irregularities and the subsequent response affect the legitimacy of the result. Managing expectations of different sets of actors is crucial but extremely challenging.
- The international community will face the dilemma of whether and how to intervene and will have to contend with multiple pressure points, including Afghan and domestic lobbies.
- The options for intervening are more limited than in the past. Experience suggests that a high degree of coherence by international actors, anchored in respect for Afghan and international law, is critical to ensuring a positive influence.
- To anticipate and manage these problems, it is essential to learn from previous elections, and to view these elections not just as a one-off event but as part of a longer-term process in Afghanistan's political evolution.

Introduction

With the approach of the next Afghan presidential and provincial elections on 5 April 2014, one of the greatest concerns is that both irregularities and fraud will take place, as in the past. Ballot-stuffing, collective voting, vote count tampering, bribery of local electoral officials, vote-buying, voter coercion, violence to force the closing of polling centres and ‘remedial fraud’ are just a few of the flagrant instances of fraud that occurred in previous election cycles.¹

The main institution responsible for adjudicating complaints, the Independent Electoral Complaints Commission (IECC), lacks both capacity and credibility (in 2009 and 2010, by contrast, international experts appointed by the United Nations sat on the commission). The possibility of significant fraud, suspected vote-rigging guided by those currently in power, and a lack of competent institutions to adjudicate protests about fraud could create a prolonged political crisis.

As in previous elections, candidates and power brokers are likely to focus more on delivering votes rather than convincing voters, to use Thomas Ruttig’s expression,² and will do so in ways that may be brutal or sophisticated depending on the region, the candidate or the power broker in question. Also as in previous elections, insurgent violence will make large areas of the territory inaccessible to monitoring by international or national observers.³ Electoral authorities and the international community will have to rely on a mix of direct reports from their electoral staff in the field, formal complaints, observer and media reports, candidate speeches and fraud triggers to audit suspect ballots, leading to what is

likely to be a tedious and delayed process of reconciliation, counting and recounting of votes, and complaint adjudication before the announcement of the final results.

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Accusations of attempted or alleged fraud by opponents throughout the electoral process will be part of the regular campaign discourse of candidates.⁴ The 2014 pre-electoral period is already laced with tension between the Afghan government and its international backers, as it was in the previous cycle.⁵ President Hamid Karzai has a track record of bringing new issues to the table, thereby creating political distractions when pressed to effect significant changes: his tactics have also included maximalist demands and playing with timelines as a way of extracting concessions.

The likely second round of the presidential election will extend the period of electoral turbulence and uncertainty to mid-2014, heightening instability in a year that is already seeing the withdrawal of most foreign troops as well as the economic transition of a country heavily dependent on international assistance and continuing conditions of

1 See the excellent series of papers on the subject of Martine van Bijlert uploaded to the Afghanistan Analysts Network website: www.afghanistan-analysts.org. Also, for a comprehensive analysis of the electoral evolution of Afghanistan, see Scott S. Smith, *Afghanistan’s Troubled Transition: Politics, Peacekeeping and the 2004 Presidential Election* (Lynne Rienner, 2011).

2 Thomas Ruttig: ‘Pluralistic within Limits but not Democratic: Afghanistan’s Political Landscape before the 2014 Elections’, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 24 October 2013, <http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/pluralistic-within-limits-but-not-democratic-afghanistans-political-landscape-before-the-2014-elections>.

3 Some of the violence may be localized and election-related, particularly since most parties and political groupings have militarized wings or more tenuous but very effective links to illegal armed groups. An electoral process also provides fertile ground for violent flare-ups of old tensions and conflicts at the local level.

4 According to the UN Development Programme’s Final Evaluation Report of the 2010 elections, ‘Many of the defeated candidates attributed their loss to intimidation and malpractice by others, rather than seeing the effect of their own actions. Electoral fraud is fundamentally a form of corruption, and corruption is fundamentally a sociological and economic phenomenon that defies technocratic band-aids’ (UNDP Final Evaluation Report, June 2011, p. 6).

5 The refusal of President Hamid Karzai to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) has already introduced a level of uncertainty and distraction in the electoral process.

insecurity in a country waging a protracted war.⁶ (Karzai's refusal to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement that provides the basis for a longer-term international troop presence and military assistance until after the election adds to this uncertainty.)

The apparent lack of progress or improvement would reinforce the pessimistic view that Afghanistan is 'marching backwards into the future' and that the expenditure of lives and money by Afghans and international backers has been in vain.

However, what has fundamentally changed is the frame of reference in which all those electoral events take place. This change in the context will affect the perception and therefore the credibility of the process for Afghan voters as well as the behaviour of Afghan political actors.

What does 'genuine and credible' elections really mean?

As Coburn and Larson state, 'the primary purpose of elections is to renegotiate power between key political groups in a non-violent manner'.⁷ Elections are, at a minimum, a conflict management mechanism allowing for the more or less peaceful confrontation of different actors and divergent interests seeking a share of power according to agreed rules, against a relatively stable framework of certainties.⁸ This instrumentalist purpose of elections is not unique to Afghanistan; however, it is less visible when politics are institutionalized in a country. In Afghanistan, a country still in the throes of a long war with insurgents, where there are weak political institutions and a recent history of political violence, this basic function of elections is more transparent.

The political usefulness of the process – its credibility for the contenders – depends at least partially on the extent to which these rules are respected: without a modicum of 'playing by the book', results will be challenged and elections can become a catalyst for political unrest, upheaval and violence. Therefore, 'outcome' cannot entirely be dismissed by 'process'.

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Consensus among political actors around electoral rules is paramount.⁹ A legal electoral framework not only embodies universal human rights principles and internationally accepted technical practices; it is also the compendium of basic agreements about the range of what can be considered fair or at least tolerable in a given society at a particular historical moment by both the elites and the citizens of a country to ensure the legitimacy of

⁶ According to the constitution, the second round has to be held two weeks after the proclamation of the official final results of the presidential election. In reality, it is likely to take several months. If everything runs smoothly with the technical processes of vote count and adjudication of complaints, it should be held in July 2014 (which coincides this year with the holy month of Ramadan). However, if this process is delayed for any reason (a high number of complaints, for instance), the second round of the presidential election may not happen until the autumn.

⁷ Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, *Derailing Democracy in Afghanistan: Elections in an Unstable Political Landscape* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

⁸ The periodicity of the elections, for instance, has to be established as a key certainty for elections to operate as an effective conflict management mechanism: if the actors are not convinced that this process of contesting power is going to be repeated within a certain timeframe, there is little incentive to commit to it as the sole path for legitimately acquiring power. Other key features of the electoral process are the standardization of the rules and procedures to all parts of the territory and all actors, and the consistency of their implementation.

⁹ In this sense, the situation in the 2014 electoral cycle is an improvement from previous elections. Previous electoral laws (2005 and 2010) were established by Presidential Legislative Decree, whereas the current electoral framework (Law on the Structure, Duties and Privileges of the Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan (IEC) and the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC), signed on 17 July 2013, and Electoral Law, signed on 20 July 2013) was the result of a long tussle between the executive and the legislative branches but was finally adopted by parliament.

the process,¹⁰ and defines the authorities that can legally and legitimately resolve disputes when they occur.¹¹

Elections rely heavily on technical components but are not a purely technical exercise. Technical steps in the electoral process act as confidence-building measures that allow different contestants to gauge how willing other contestants are to respect the rules, how firm the electoral authorities are as arbiters, how consistent and standardized the process is in its implementation. The technical elements of the process are not an end in themselves but a means to an end: ensuring that the process is perceived as a credible source of legitimacy for the winners and for the political system in general. In other words, the sound technical implementation of an election serves the purpose of building trust within the space demarcated by agreed rules, so that contestants can develop their strategies in a relatively peaceful manner.

How voters perceive the process and behave towards it, particularly when they are caught in a net of patronage, insecurity, instability and uncertainty, as well as ‘unease and fear about the future’,¹² is conditioned by their intimate knowledge of what they see happening in their communities, be it dealt by candidates with their traditional elders or with the emergent leadership of the new patronage networks, pressures, vote-buying or violence, and by rumours that magnify and distort whatever is happening beyond their communities. How voters react to such events can determine turnout and the credibility of the process.

Clash of expectations against a backdrop of uncertainty

Behind any election, beyond the speechifying of campaigns and the brouhaha of political rallies, there are vigorous and broad-ranging conversations. These exchanges about strategic choices among and between

different groups of actors are based on mutual perceptions and expectations, shared history, past misconceptions and misunderstandings, degree of trust/distrust, and cultural styles, to name but a few of the factors that govern those interactions. We identify three groups of actors for the purpose of this policy brief: the Afghan people, the Afghan political elite and the international community.

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The Afghan people

Many Afghans are uneasy about the forthcoming elections. For the first time, they face an electoral process where Hamid Karzai will not be running for president. This election will be like no other, for three reasons: a) if everything goes well, for the first time in Afghan history the incumbent will leave power to his elected successor according to the constitutionally mandated terms; b) the results of the presidential race are uncertain as President Karzai has not anointed a successor; and c) foreign troops

10 The term ‘genuine elections’ deriving from Article 25 (b) the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1976) refers to the need not only for an unadulterated contest but also for an authentic one, a process that the citizens and elites of a country can recognize as an expression of their society, within the stated parameters of respect for the principles of the Covenant.

11 The latter was a source of problems in the previous cycles, with ad hoc measures being taken that resulted in an illegitimate outcome.

12 In a 2013 survey, 59% of respondents expressed unease and fear about the future. See Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2013: A Survey of the Afghan People*. <http://asiafoundation.org/country/afghanistan/2013-poll.php>.

are withdrawing and an era of visible international intervention is coming to an end.

A complex mix of scepticism, cynicism, hope, pride and fear has always coloured the attitudes of Afghan citizens towards elections.¹³ Urbanization and demographic change are major factors, though the relative importance of the urban/rural differences or the impact of a youth bulge¹⁴ may not be apparent until the results of the 2014 election are clear.

A large proportion of the population came of age in a post-Bonn environment. The country is urbanizing rapidly, and young voters have different expectations regarding elections from those of their elders. A generation of better-educated young people has emerged. They are more exposed to global trends, better networked both with one another and with civil society organizations, private-sector small enterprises and universities, many of which have relied on foreign support. However, migration from rural to urban areas has also created a marginalized underclass of youth in the outskirts of cities and towns. Political actors can mobilize and co-opt both groups. Relatively privileged urban young people face as much uncertainty as anyone else and, like students and youth elsewhere, can be agents of and responsive to demands for political change. How they will participate in the current electoral cycle is a matter of speculation and sometimes of wishful thinking.

Those tensions are likely to escalate as the uncertainties of the 2014 Afghan political landscape and international context increase. Already, there are signs of anxiety at a possible 'zero option' following the refusal of President Karzai to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA), disquiet about the different transitions that will

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take place in Afghanistan even if the BSA is signed, and speculation about President Karzai's true intentions.¹⁵ If the BSA crisis drags on until election day, the spillover effects are likely to be seen in voter and candidate behaviour at the polls.¹⁶

Voter turnout in Afghanistan has been decreasing significantly since 2004.¹⁷ It would take very little, including a worsening of security conditions, for citizens to abstain from participating in the polls, thus increasing the temptation of power brokers to carry out 'remedial fraud' to compensate for low turnout.¹⁸ For regular citizens, adversarial strong-armed campaigns, blatant attempts at vote-buying and open preparations for the manipulation of the electoral process operate as a disincentive to participate in an electoral process. Such a disincentive not only affects the credibility of the elections, it also debases the mechanism of elections for the future, particularly in a country where there are other competing forms of non-elective representation (religious authorities, elders, shuras,

13 N. Coburn and A. Larson, *Justifying the Means: Afghan Perceptions of Electoral Process* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, Special Report, February 2013). www.usip.org.

14 Approximately 10% of the population live in Kabul. In 2012, it was estimated that only 2.4% of the population were aged over 65. Estimated annual population growth rate is 2.8%.

15 See, for example, Ernesto Londono, 'Ordinary Afghans' anxiety about the future grows as security deal with US remains in limbo', *Washington Post*, 13 December 2013.

16 By refusing to sign the BSA until a new president is elected in April, Karzai has not only forced candidates to declare a position regarding this agreement but also introduced a degree of urgency to the proclamation of a winner in the electoral contest, as military planning regarding deployment of troops is now linked to the outcome of the election.

17 See 'International IDEA Voter Turnout Data for Afghanistan', <http://www.idea.int/vt>.

18 In the same Asia Foundation Survey, 59% of respondents 'expressed some level of fear when voting in a national or provincial election' and 58% 'expressed some level of fear to run for public office'. Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2013*.

patronage networks) that are sometimes perceived as more legitimate.¹⁹

The Afghan political elite

As a political class, the non-Taliban Afghan elite views elections as a way of apportioning power among the already powerful in a political landscape characterized by patronage, political fragmentation, bargaining and manipulation, violence and fraud. The current 'limited pluralism' reflects the diversity of the former *mujahideen* movements; it makes the electoral process to some degree a continuation, by institutionalized means, of the truce established among power brokers during the Bonn negotiations in 2001.²⁰ This process is preferable, in a cost-benefit analysis, to the other set of rules this political class knows: armed struggle and civil war. It has provided tools for the leadership of certain communities to advance further than would have been the case had it resorted to violence or warfare.²¹ Whereas in the absence of active political parties, and with only dimly articulated ideological platforms, the election might be reduced to a proxy census where family, ethnic and community identities become the drivers of the vote, the electoral framework has effectively facilitated inter- and intra-community bargaining and trading with 'vote banks'.²² All political

actors have also mastered the game of 'pull and push' with the international community, appealing to their good offices when they are not achieving their objectives through direct negotiations, but denouncing and rejecting their intervention when it is convenient.

As a group, this non-Taliban political elite has a vested interest in maintaining both the constitutional order and political stability. The electoral process allows it accurately to demonstrate its political strength by delivering blocs of votes or impeding other power brokers from providing their promised votes. However, the dynamics of this system of bargaining and 'political mutual deterrence' (bending and manipulating rules but not going beyond certain boundaries) have depended on two factors. On the one hand, President Hamid Karzai has operated in the past as *primus inter pares* among the players but also as final arbiter, the ultimate player within this game. On the other hand, and to a lesser extent, the international community has not only financed and supported the whole exercise but has also operated as a *deus ex machina* policing the borders of the system. Karzai is no longer a candidate and the international community is in retreat from Afghanistan. The disruption caused by the combination of these two factors creates new dynamics, fears and perceived opportunities of a rebalancing of power among the players. Afghanistan may experience more blatant and extensive levels of fraud in the 2014 elections than in previous cycles as power brokers position themselves for a more uncertain future. Moreover, concerned for his fate, legacy and continued relevance in a post-2014 environment, and faced with the possibility of soon becoming a 'lame duck', President Karzai is likely to increase his brinkmanship, which will introduce further turbulence into the system.

The international community is a diverse group with different expectations and policy agendas, albeit one that

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19 William Maley, 'Making Elections Count', AAN Guest Blog, 20 October 2010, <http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/aan-guest-blog-making-elections-count>.

20 Ruttig, 'Pluralistic within Limits but not Democratic'.

21 The Hazara community used the electoral instrument quite effectively in 2010, for instance. It nonetheless accepted compromises such as were reached in Ghazni: even those communities that master the art of playing with and within the electoral rules are not ready to cross certain boundaries. See Pamela Post, 'Afghanistan's Hazaras gain clout in disputed parliamentary election', *Washington Post*, 24 December 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/12/23/AR2010122304577.html>.

22 The alliance formed between Ashraf Ghani and Abdul Rashid Dostum is an example of such a negotiation, although, as this example also shows, it would be simplistic to reduce the possible alliances to simply ethnic or community bases. Economic ties, past jihadi allegiances, current convenience, and other factors could create a much more complicated picture.

succeeded in presenting a concerted front in past elections. It has always faced the quandary of when and how to intervene in the process. Historically, its engagement has ranged from decisive intervention to a low-key diplomatic intervention to get the losing candidates to accept the outcome after an outcry over faulty indelible ink followed by benign neglect in the aftermath of the first electoral cycle. Extreme pressure was exerted to force changes in some of the provisions of the legal electoral framework using aid resources as leverage after the 2010 Electoral Law was passed by presidential legislative decree: the IECC was forced to use its powers to declare that elections could not happen owing to lack of resources, and that opened the path to direct negotiations between President Karzai and the United Nations Special Representative, as the spokesperson of the international community. Past experience shows that – despite inflated Afghan perceptions of the capacity of the international community to influence the electoral process – short of triggering the drastic option of conditionality in financial aid, the range of available options to avert, mitigate or help correct fraudulent practices in Afghan politics is limited.²³ Red lines in the past have too often turned into red carpets, in the words of a former senior Afghan electoral official.²⁴

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Even if there are low expectations for the 2014 election, the process cannot be dismissed as mere theatre, owing

to a number of factors that were not present in previous election cycles:

- The process through which a new official Afghan interlocutor for the international community is going to be elected: the new president will have to navigate the different transitions and shape with regional neighbours and insurgent groups some form of stable future for Afghanistan; a legitimacy deficit would dampen his prospects of leading such processes with authority;
- the trade-offs between power brokers to get a candidate elected may be an early indication of the political constellations that will emerge in the post-Karzai era;
- overt disenfranchisement of communities and groups has the potential to further destabilize the situation and shift allegiances to insurgent factions precisely at the moment when foreign troops are withdrawing from the country; and
- in the midst of a world economic crisis, a fatigue with Afghanistan among both citizens and politicians in the West has turned to irritation and strong pressure to disengage from the country: egregious fraud widely covered by international media will increase the pressure to expedite that disengagement and further reduce development aid to the country.

Representatives of the international community thus have a smaller margin for manoeuvre now than they did in previous elections. They have shown restraint up to this point, supporting the technical aspects of the process and avoiding any perception of interference. However, what will they do when irregularities turn to patterns of massive fraud? How much fraud and how much media coverage of electoral irregularities would prevent the international community from recognizing the new leader and the emerging constellations of power brokers that support him? What is ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ fraud and how should the international community deal with it?

23 After more than 12 years of ‘playing in the same sandbox’ with the international community, local power brokers, and President Karzai in particular, can anticipate certain moves of their international counterparts and call their bluff, if needed, by appealing to nationalistic aspects of Afghan culture in the name of sovereignty.

24 The ongoing negotiations on the BSA and its shifting deadlines and red lines to trigger the ‘zero option’ restrict those options even further, as any ultimatum or firm line will be considered tentative and negotiable.

How should its representatives seek to manage the messy aftermath of the polls?

What is to be done?

The following points and principles, which are based on experience of previous Afghan elections, might help inform the international community's reaction to electoral developments.

1. **Recognize that the international community has very little leverage in this process.** The international community has a chequered record in its attitude towards electoral fraud in Afghanistan. During the 2004–05 cycle, despite the heavy foreign presence, it chose to look the other way when faced with irregularities, in part because it was viewing the process through rose-tinted glasses and in part as a result of the primacy of political calculation. It was fixated on getting the 'right result' – in other words, a candidate that it favoured. In the 2009–10 cycle, it resorted to a mix of cajoling and threats, crystallized in the inconsistently applied red lines, and followed through only once with the suspension of funding for electoral operations. President Karzai used the opportunity to rail against foreign interference and stir Afghan nationalist tendencies.

In today's more polarized and politically charged climate, where President Karzai has already publicly accused the United States and NATO of behaving like colonial powers, with the bonds of trust that enable phone calls and discreet conversations broken, the leverage available over the government is both limited and extreme: de-funding the electoral operation, suspending official development aid and withdrawing troops.²⁵ Any of those severe measures is a one-off that would cause more harm than good if the international community seeks to have a constructive relationship with Afghanistan in the future. The reservoir of political trust is simply not there, nor has it been built over the last few years. On the other hand, there might be greater leverage over the candidates, and their role will

become more important during the election process. Diplomatic interventions need to reinforce existing ad hoc mechanisms of dialogue and dispute resolution set up by the Afghan political class to make the electoral process, if not cleaner, at least tidier and lead to the final acceptance of results (see point 6 below).

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2. **Respect the primacy of legality.** It is because the constitutional and electoral rules bind the non-Taliban elite that the elections are so important. Some practices may be ill advised and destabilizing, but could occur without violating the legal framework. For example, an application of Article 59.2 of the Electoral Law that states 'A low turnout in some of the electoral constituencies or polling centers does not jeopardize the principles of freeness and universality of the elections' might be unsatisfactory if implemented in many districts to prevent the nullification of the election. Coupled with the delays in the security assessments of polling centres, this article has the potential to disenfranchise entire communities. It is still within the confines of the law and within the obligations of Afghan authorities to apply the law. For obvious reasons, the international community cannot be seen as criticizing the application of the law to the elections, but it can raise concerns about its implementation.

²⁵ Interview: Frédéric Bobin, 'Hamid Karzai: The United States behaves in Afghanistan like a colonial power', *Le Monde*, 10 December 2013, http://www.lemonde.fr/asiе-pacifique/article/2013/12/10/hamid-karzai-the-united-states-behaves-in-afghanistan-like-a-colonial-power_3528719_3216.html.

3. **Remember that irregularities are only relevant to the electoral process when they affect the result.** The golden rule that all electoral officials apply around the world is that the sum total of irregularities should not exceed the difference of votes between two candidates necessary to determine who wins the seat. This is one of the main technical differences between electoral experts and human rights advocates: while all forms of fraud are an attack on the franchise and therefore on the civic and political rights of citizens, in an election what is important is not only the process but also the result. That is why local-level elections are more complex from the standpoint of fraud, as sometimes only a few votes determine which of two candidates obtains a seat.

Presidential elections that treat the whole country as a single constituency are less problematic, as the margins tend to be wider. However, as the critical number to avoid the second round is 50% of the votes plus one, it would be reasonable to expect fraud to be perpetrated by candidates who believe they can reach that margin, or by those who fear that one of the other candidates will do so. Also, the second round opens endless possibilities of bargaining, trading of influence and positioning for the future allocation of power or influence.²⁶ All candidates (or at least their campaigns and local machineries of power) will attempt to inflate their results, even those who have no chance of winning the popular vote.

4. **Don't be pulled into side issues.** A classic example of a side issue is the *ritornello* of fake voter registration cards, an issue that reappears with each electoral cycle. Patterns of fraud in Afghanistan have never relied on falsified voter registration cards: they have favoured the more primitive but effective techniques of ballot-stuffing, inflated female voting, family voting, ghost polling stations, falsification of electoral forms, tampering with the vote count and using violence to deny adversaries pools of votes.

The media, certain NGOs and candidates regularly denounce the existence of voter registration card factories in Pakistan, report that there are more voter cards than voters in Afghanistan or show pictures of individuals with multiple voter cards under different names. It would be unwise for the international community to waste limited leverage and political capital on them. By the same token, the number of ballots printed is less important than the controls established by the IECC over the ballot papers: simple technical measures incorporated in the chain of custody, security and procedures can allow the tracking of ballot papers and ballot boxes and mitigate the effects (intended or unintended) of an overabundance of ballots. Visits from the international community to the IECC authorities expressing concern over the issue would certainly have an impact and force the IECC to address it.

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Structural issues such as the collusion of the Afghan police and armed forces with electoral officials that enables the regular patterns of fraud to occur are central to the integrity of the process and acceptance of the results. This issue needs to be raised not only with the electoral authorities but

²⁶ In the words of Noah Coburn during a presentation at the event on 'Afghanistan's Presidential Elections: Parameters and Policy Options' (Chatham House/USIP, Washington DC, 14 February 2014): 'The fact that a candidate has no chance to win an election doesn't mean that he hasn't anything to win from participating in the elections.'

also with the Afghan National Security Forces. One of the most relevant issues may be the late composition of the IECC: with the provincial commissioners still not appointed, there is not enough time – even assuming the best of intentions – to provide the necessary training required for the standardized application and shared interpretation of rules, regulations, procedures and laws in the national territory. While international pressure needs to be maintained on this topic, it is important to support and enhance mechanisms of political dispute resolution among political actors that will lead to the acceptance of results.

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5. **Not all violence will be caused by insurgents, but all violence will be attributed to them.** As stated before, violence has a key role to play in modern Afghan campaigning: intimidating potential voters, silencing the media, distorting security assessments conducted prior to the final list of polling centres, and eliminating key figures in opponents’ campaign strategies. The international community still has the means to monitor patterns of violence and should try to determine, when the campaign starts, what trends and patterns of electoral-related violence can be identified. The consolidation of systematic and systemic trends in this respect warrants the use of

some of the limited capital available to the international community to intervene more forcefully *vis-à-vis* the Afghan Security Forces, for instance, or local power brokers. The idea of threatening to put major violators on the international watch lists has been floated, for instance.

6. **Favour Afghan solutions from within the system for Afghan problems created by the system.** For the first time in Afghanistan’s electoral history, with the exception of a reduced group of international experts in advisory roles, this will be a fully Afghanized electoral process. Even the contingents of international observers will be mostly absent from the contest: although the EU, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the US-funded organization Democracy International will deploy missions of international observers, their territorial coverage will be limited for security reasons.²⁷

The international community has shown restraint in its reaction to the technical hiccups of the process until now. It should continue its work behind the scene, convincing the Afghan political class that now is the time to form alliances not only to access, win or retain power but also to defend the structures of a system that has served it well. This includes defining the levels of fraud that the candidates and their backers are willing to accept in the process and the measures to be taken to deal with contested results.

The international community should urge candidates to define as a group the red lines of this process and what are acceptable and unacceptable irregularities and behaviour. This definition is not technical but political and should be done by Afghans, and the Afghan candidates in particular. By establishing agreed mechanisms to deal with technical glitches, attempts at internal fraud (undertaken by the authorities) and external fraud (launched by non-state political machineries), electoral disputes and contested results, Afghan politicians are also

27 Donors have made the choice of privileging the funding of national monitoring groups over the missions of international observation. Even local groups of observers will be affected in their coverage of areas deemed insecure.

establishing the boundaries of their own actions. By supporting such an initiative and adopting these as *the* red lines of the electoral process, the international community would be in a stronger position to advocate on behalf of genuine and credible elections without being accused of interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan.

7. **Prepare now for the day after.** Contingency plans are essential if the international community does not want to enter into an all-too-familiar reactive *modus operandi* typical of tactical games in the aftermath of

the polls. ‘What if’ scenarios are useful tools in that respect, particularly if the objective of encouraging the Afghan candidates to define unacceptable levels of fraud has been achieved. These scenarios should go beyond electoral fraud and address the broader issue of how the international community would react to the impact made by the quality of the electoral process of 5 April on Afghan constituencies but also on the international media. This would help to devise a consistent and coherent strategic response, and avoid making premature statements that might foreclose possible solutions to a political impasse.

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