



# Middle East Studies

at the Marine Corps University

MES Insights • Volume 1, Issue 4

September 2010

## Just Another Election?

by Lieutenant Colonel Wolfram Jaeger (DEU)

Elections are an integral part of democracies and regularly shape democratic societies either for the better or for the worse. Furthermore, depending on a particular country's relative importance in the international sphere, the impact of elections can travel beyond national borders.

On the world stage, Afghanistan is a minor player in terms of exerting direct economic or political power. The upcoming election in late summer to Wolesi Jirga (People's Council) is to award 249 seats in lower house of the Afghan National Assembly (parliament) for five years. Viewed in isolation, the upcoming election is of no great consequence for the rest of the world. However, the potential impact of this September 18th election may reach far beyond the borders of the Hindu Kush and could, in fact, force the political landscape in many countries to shift over the long term.

The reportedly widespread election fraud of 2009, mostly committed on behalf of the incumbent Hamid Karzai, received a tepid response at best from the international community and forced Afghans to accept the corruption and the election results as a fait accompli. There were no measures developed neither to combat the irregularities nor mitigate the potential for future infractions. Karzai returned to another term as president, there were no new elections, and resentment grew within the Afghan population in the same proportion to the voters in North America. Europeans and others lost confidence in the promises of their own politicians about Afghanistan.

## MES Notes

### MES Iran Lecture Series

MES at MCU will be hosting the Iran Lecture Series throughout the 2010-2011 Academic Year entitled "Toward a Better Understanding of the Islamic Republic of Iran." This Series will begin in late October and run through May 2011.

More information about the Iran Lecture Series, including some background and a proposed agenda, will be provided on the MES at MCU website as it becomes available.

Further information and resources pertaining to the MES Iran Lecture Series, as well as the 2010 MES AfPak Lecture Series, are available at : <http://www.mcu.usmc.mil/Pages/Middle%20East%20Studies.aspx>.

POC for MES Lecture Series is Mr. Adam Seitz at (703) 432-5260 or [seitzac@grc.usmcu.edu](mailto:seitzac@grc.usmcu.edu).

### MES at MCU Disclaimer

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the individual author and do not necessarily represent the views of either the Marine Corps University or any other governmental agency. Any references to this newsletter should include the foregoing statement

Despite last year's disappointments, those both inside and outside of Afghanistan have great expectations for the upcoming elections. Many candidates decided to accept the high risks involved and have been campaigning where feasible. There are certain areas of the country that are not accessible due to the deteriorated security environment, limiting candidates' electioneering to Kabul and other major cities. Further limiting the candidate pool is the apparently arbitrary disqualification of certain candidates by the Afghan Electoral Commission. International organizations had previously attacked the Commission's lack of momentum; however, the cryptic process it has elected to follow leaves many dissatisfied with their lack of transparency. Further complicating matters is the difficulty in ascertaining the status of the relationship between the candidates and the warlords and other clandestine groups.

Karzai believes he does not have much to fear in these elections. He is banking on the election results being accepted by the international community since their level of tolerance for fraud appears to be quite high. Karzai may have to weather a few official and unofficial protests, but nothing more.. In certain areas Karzai's protégées are expected to win their districts on their own merit and thus broaden his power base. However, if they do not receive the most votes and they happen to be from important, influential districts, when the final votes are tallied, they are expected to come out on top. Karzai is seeking to bolster "his candidates'" chances by distancing himself from Western governments and policies. As the election draws near, his criticisms have increased to demonstrate to Afghan voters he is not a Western puppet.

For the majority of the over 18,000 candidates, the goal of this election is to gain influence over and access to financial resources. No matter their walks in life, for most candidates, the well-being of Afghanistan is secondary, and for the minority who truly are concerned with the welfare and future of Afghanistan, it is expected that they will receive only a very small share of seats in the Wolesi Jirga.

At election time, the average Afghan is confronted with the following fundamental questions: Is it safe for me to go to the polls, or do I have to fear reprisals? If I take the risk and vote, will my vote be counted at all - or will there be rampant fraud as was the case during the presidential election? It is not about the actual proportion of the electoral fraud, but rather the perception thereof. Why should the average Afghan risk to serve the "Taliban" as a target when his vote may not be counted, thus diminishing the prospect for change and his own benefit from the election? This attitude is especially prevalent in those areas of the country where the central government is still not present, or at least not permanently. The disillusionment grows in proportion to the perception of anticipated electoral fraud.

## MES Past Events and Recent Publications

9 August 2010

Dr. Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "Recalibrating the Afghan Reconciliation Program to the CMC Fellows at the Navy Annex, Arlington, VA.

17 August 2010

Dr. Amin Tarzi presented a PME lecture entitled "The Historical Relationship between State Formation and Judicial System reform in Afghanistan" to the US Army JAG Legal Center and School, Charlottesville, VA.

Recent Publication

Amin Tarzi, "Recalibrating the Afghan Reconciliation Program", in *PRISM Vol 1 No 4*, Journal for the Center for Complex Operations (CCO), NDU Press, Washington, D.C., Sept 2010.

Publication available at: <http://www.mcu.usmc.mil/Pages/Middle%20East%20Studies.aspx>, under the Publications link..

The "Taliban" - and there are many groups of differing motivations and objectives included in this definition - are not represented officially at the election and therefore have no interest in its success. Threats against those citizens willing to vote have increased. There have been attacks on polling stations, and these will likely continue. As long as these groups are not involved in the political process, they will not have a vested interest in its success. Why support a system that brings no personal benefit? Better to antagonize it and prepare the way for a new apparatus - a regime like the old "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" that promises benefits to those who are not included in the existing Karzai governmental system. (Thus the term "extra-parliamentary opposition" would be certainly appropriate for most of those we call "the Taliban".)

Representatives of the numerous NGOs in Afghanistan are in a predicament. For them, this election needs to be a success; otherwise the donations from their Western donor countries, which fund their activities and their pay checks, will appreciably diminish. However, a closer association with the elections, and thus the Afghan government increases their risk of being targeted. Each additional dead or injured member of the international community leads to a reduction in the NGOs' profile in the rural areas, and as the elections near, this is expected to increase due to continued Taliban attacks on "supporters of the system."

But the real significance of the Afghan election is for United States and Europe. President Barack Obama has declared Afghanistan a 'top priority' and thus connected his political destiny with the success of the mission in Afghanistan. Defeat can no longer be blamed on the former President George W. Bush. With the official announcement of the end of the combat phase of the Iraq war, the president shifted, perhaps unintentionally, the focus of the American public opinion to the development in Afghanistan. A failure there will impact the outcome of the U.S. congressional elections, as well as the 2012 presidential election.

What does success look like? At a minimum, there needs to be a successful withdrawal of foreign forces from a stabilized Afghanistan that has an accepted Afghan government, reasonably fair elections, and popular political participation. If the Afghan people do not feel this is likely, support for the "Taliban" will rise and complicate the situation, most likely resulting in higher casualties, both local and from the international community.

This in turn will further weaken support in the U.S. and on the European continent. In addition to the U.S. government, it is mainly the ruling political elites of Europe that have to fear the Afghan elections. If there is another election deemed unsuccessful by the voters as a result of honest-to-goodness fraud, the number of fatigued supporters of the Afghan campaign will increase. The war-weary Europeans look primarily at the cost of 'Mission Afghanistan.' Nevertheless, with increasing economic problems in Europe, the willingness to support an Afghan system perceived as corrupt and fraudulent is expected to decline. Furthermore, European politicians who want to be elected (or re-elected) may refrain from articulating their support for the Afghan government too openly; otherwise they might receive the same treatment as the Dutch government. Christian Democratic Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende had to offer his government's resignation after considering a NATO request for Dutch forces to stay beyond August 2010 in the southern Afghan province of Uruzgan.

Finally, the main question remains unanswered even in the wake of the election for the Wolesi Jirga: "Quo vadis, Afghanistan?"

As long as the International Community has not outlined and agreed upon a clear and concise desired end state of affairs in Afghanistan, all elections in the Hindu Kush can - by proponents and opponents of the current system - be perceived as wasted paper. So it is just another election.

## MES International Fellow AY 2010-2011

Middle East Studies welcomes Lieutenant Colonel Wolfram Jaeger from the German Armed Forces (Bundeswehr) as the new International Fellow of Middle East Studies at Marine Corps University. LTC Jaeger has studied history, social sciences and international law at Bundeswehr University in Hamburg, where he received an M.A. He has served on several missions abroad, the last one as G2, German Contingent and Deputy J2 Regional Command North in 2007 - 2008. His position prior to joining MES in July 2010 was Head of Military History Department at Army Officer School in Dresden.

While at MES, LTC Jaeger's research will be on 'Stability and Stabilization of Regions' with special emphasis devoted to the Afghan/Pakistan region. From the many troop contributing states to NATO's International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, his research will focus on the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany, looking at both military and civilian approaches.

LtCol Jaeger will be at MES until July 2011 and can be reached at:

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