

Ethnic Challenges and Democratic Consolidation in Afghanistan

*Dr. Rajeesh C Sarngadharan
Mr. Shahid NP
Mr. Farid Zaman
Mr. Abdihamid Mohamed Isak
(Department of Political Science
School of Humanities
Lovely Professional University)*

Abstract

The paper discusses the ethnic conglomeration and its impacts on Afghan political system. Ethnic division was explicitly visible during the 2004 Presidential elections in Afghanistan. For the unity that could have come from 2001, the election results shattered any hope that the country had overcome its fractures. The winner needed to find a way to unite a country that could not be more divided. The amazing factor of Afghan society is that ninety percent population of one region will vote against the candidate of other ethnicity. However, it reflects the division of Afghan society. The electoral partition fell along ethnic lines. This paper gives the impression that democracy can only be survived in Afghanistan by compromising much of its basic principles.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Clans, Democracy, Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras

Introduction

Afghan democracy has long history from its conception. Until the start of the 20th century, Afghanistan was non-democratic as the king was supreme in all matters. It is only in 20th century that the country's political evolution towards democracy can be said to have begun. This evolution has been through a very gradual adoption of democracy because in all the preceding centuries, Afghanistan had not been a democracy nor was the Afghan society based on democratic values in the modern sense. A society with no previous experience of democracy was naturally going to face a challenge in establishing a viable and sustainable democracy. Therefore, the task of establishing democracy was time-taking and was bound to go through periods of struggle and disappointments. In case like this, there is often a long political struggle in which democracy has to fight a pitched battle against the undemocratic

interests and elements inside the society and state. Afghan democracy commenced from 1920s as a seed, but now it is relatively in a more mature position. In this political journey, Afghan democracy met in its path both the elements: those who cooperated with democracy and who were against it. The present chapter deals with the long history of evolution of democracy, stating how political democracy evolved in Afghanistan.

Ethnic Challenges to Electoral Politics

Ethnic challenges are a very big internal problem of Afghan society. Afghan society is divided on ethnicity. Since 2001, when Afghanistan adopted electoral politics, ethnic factor has been playing an important role in it. Ethnic division was explicitly visible during the 2004 Presidential elections in Afghanistan. For the unity that could have come from 2001, the election results shattered any hope that the country had overcome its fractures. The winner needed to find a way to unite a country that could not be more divided. The amazing factor of Afghan society is that ninety percent population of one region will vote against the candidate of other ethnicity. However, it reflects the division of Afghan society. The electoral partition fell along ethnic lines (The Washington Post 2013).

Afghanistan is even now an ethnically dominated country with four largest ethnic groups – Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek. These four communities comprise around ninety percent of the population. The remaining ethnicities make up 10% of the population. The role of them is perhaps more crucial in Afghanistan than anywhere else in the world. Whereas most of the developing countries have a rural-urban dichotomy, Afghanistan adds a third element, the nomad, representing up to 30% of the total population while city dwellers represent only 25%. Change in space is occurring rapidly in the country, however, and over the past five years, Afghanistan has seen a 5% increase in urbanization, the fourth highest in the world (Dubow 2009).

As Pashtuns form the largest community, they believed that they have right to rule on Afghanistan. If any other community would rule Afghanistan, Pashtuns would not like this. Not only Pashtuns, but also all ethnic communities feel that they are the supreme community. Every community thinks that its tribe, language, customs, traditions are the supreme. The Tajiks' role as bureaucrats and the importance of their language has given them their own claim to rule as well as a deep-seeded resentment of the conquering and, in their view, incompetent and

racist Pashtuns. The Hazaras are facing constant oppression and discrimination at the hands of other dominant communities. Apart from that, the causes of electoral patterns become clearer as does the extent of the hindrances to nationhood (Dubow 2009).

In 2004, seven provinces have shown evidence that more than 90% of their votes were going to one candidate in one constituency. However, the 2009 election showed more diverse outcome than 2004 Presidential election. Though spatial link between ethnicity and vote distribution is observable, its strength has been weakening over the time. In Kabul, the strength of the sub-national or ethnic loyalty was shown to be weak, as the native President candidate, Abdullah Abdullah received the same percentage of votes there as he has received on a national level. In Ghazni, it was shown that the strength of ethnicity and religion could be overcome; as the Shiite Hazara candidate Bashardost received the majority of his votes from non-Hazara communities. In Kandahar, it was shown that the power of ethnicity is weakening even in the most homogenous provinces as Panjshir. Finally, in Jawzjan, a province without an ethnic interest in the race, it was shown that even without ethnicity, Afghans can still arrive at the same voter distribution.

Map Ethnic Groups in Afghanistan



Source: Ethnic Groups Map of Afghanistan (www.mapsofworld.com)

During this period, the international community again faced the challenge of dealing with a conflict that is interpreted as an ethnic one. The architects of a future Afghanistan would be well advised to work against the ethnic polarization of the country (Dubow 2009). The architects want and wish that Afghanistan could become a strong country when ethnic divisions would be very less in Afghan society. It is also true that ethnicity is neither the cause of Afghan conflict nor a natural constant of human being. Ethnic groups have been created with cultural substance mainly by Western concept. While ethnicity was not a dominant political factor in pre-war Afghanistan, it emerged as a main source of political and military mobilization especially since 1992 (Schetter 2003).

Electoral Process in the New Constitution

The election system is used to select Afghanistan's Wolesi Jirga (lower house of parliament). It radically shaped the realms of democratic stability and political legitimacy since the Parliamentary elections of 2005. Afghanistan uses the Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) in all 34 provinces (Schetter 2010). All constituencies are multi-member constituencies with provision of a special affirmative action for women. The election system shaped the voting behaviour and the development of political parties. This has directed the type of campaigning conducted by candidates. The system also limits the power of the Wolesi Jirga as a decision-making house situated within the framework of the Afghan state along with the executive power of the Presidency (Reynolds and Carey 2012).

After a long political crisis, Afghan politics started using the SNTV method. This happened after a series of very interesting events. After an unsuccessful explanation of a closed-list PR system by proposer Enayat Qasmi, the individual in charge of explaining the system to the Wolesi Jirga, Hamid Karzai asked the Joint Election Management Body (JEMB) to make a list of electoral systems that would allow voters to vote for an individual candidate. Since single member districts were already out of the question, SNTV was selected as the 'least bad' choice based on the incorrect information given to the JEMB. This choice, in actuality, was more like a process of random elimination. This shows that Karzai and his supporters did not choose SNTV based method after understanding of its consequences. Karzai also did not give the consent to pressure a change from SNTV to a list-PR system, as he feared the opposition could take too much benefit from using the list-PR system (Ghadiri 2010).

UNAMA and its Role

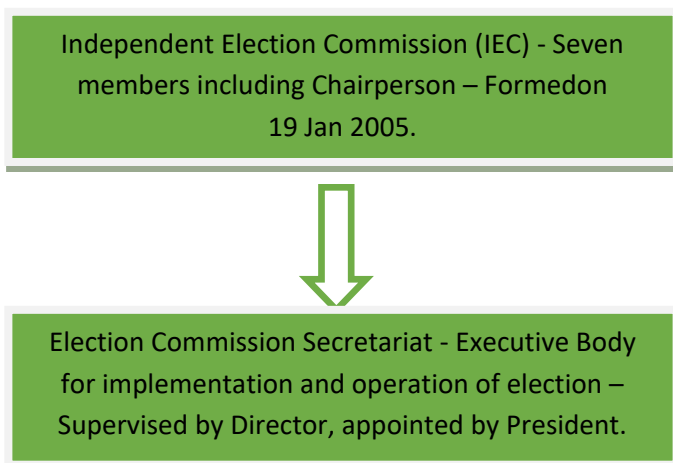
"United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) is a political mission established by the United Nations Organization (UNO). It was set up at the request of the Government of Afghanistan and aim was to assist it (UNAMA 2013). This was the foundation mission for sustainable peace and development for the people of Afghanistan. This was set up initially on 28 March 2002 by the United Nations Security Council Resolution No. 1401.

Main areas of UNAMA's work are promotion of human rights; and to supervise and organize all UN-led humanitarian relief, reconstruction and development activities in Afghanistan. All

these activities were approved by the UNSC Resolution 1662 (UNAMA 2013). The UNAMA, adopted unanimously by the UN Security Council on 19 March 2013, sets out the scope and range of its activities (Resolution 2096). Overall, the resolution called for UNAMA with the help of international civilian efforts guided by the principle of reinforcing Afghan independence, sovereignty and leadership. Its immediate mission was to give a particular focus on the Afghan politics, the organization of future elections, including the 2014 presidential and provincial council elections. UN Development Programme has been providing long-term assistance to the Independent Election Commission in Afghanistan, focusing on institutional strengthening and capacity, with an overarching objective of supporting the national electoral institutions to plan and conduct elections with minimal external support, and to ensure the integrity of the process.

IEC and its Significance

- “Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan (IEC) has the main responsibility for ensuring and conducting the Afghanistan’s elections free and fair. Its role is very important to understand the democratic process of Afghanistan.” The free and fair election is the core point of democratic feature of any country. IEC has responsibility of the entire process that depends on the commission’s work. “The strategic goals of IEC include the strengthening an atmosphere of trust and building support for the electoral process. Reducing the electoral expenses through capacity building, infrastructural development and better management of resources, IEC proves itself as one of the best institutions in the country. It was conducting elections in accordance with the Law” (Independent Election Commission 2017).



The UNO has appreciated the transparency and accountability dimensions of IEC. Many major international actors involved in Afghanistan have approved the works done by as successful as the 2009 Presidential Elections and 2010 Parliamentary elections. After 2009 elections, the IEC had directed some reforms to “strengthen its effectiveness. They can be summed up as”:

- Increasing the capacity of the IEC secretariat to record and report on its activities, through the appointment of dedicated staff.
- A number of anti-fraud measures were devised to improve the credibility of the electoral process.
- The IEC is pursuing regular meetings with donors and stakeholders such as observers, in order to better understand and meet their needs.
- The IEC has announced its intention to allow stakeholders the opportunity to observe meetings of the IEC Board of Commissioners” (Independent Election Commission 2017).

Voter Registration Process during Elections in Afghanistan

Under 2001 Bonn Agreement, it was decided to conduct Presidential elections to give Afghanistan stability and giving the country an elected head of the state in the form of President replacing interim government. The elections were originally scheduled for June, then delayed until September and then actually conducted on 9th October 2004. Hamid Karzai won the election with 55.4% of the votes and three times more votes than any other candidate did. It is estimated that more than three-quarters of Afghanistan’s nearly 12 million registered voters cast ballots. The election was overseen by the Joint Electoral Management Body, chaired by Zakim Shah and vice-chaired by Ray Kennedy, an American working for the United Nations (Jay 2004).

The voter registration program before the 2004 Presidential elections was implemented as one of the most important steps for free and fair elections in accordance with the Bonn Agreement. The voter registration program for the presidential election was intended to support the development of a comprehensive voter registry in Afghanistan. However, the condition of the country confines the success of the voter registration program to achieve its objective to the

fullest. Even then, the registration drive was successful in registering a very large number of people. A national population survey was advisable in getting estimation on the number of eligible voters in Afghanistan. However, the financial and cultural constraints made this process unfeasible before the presidential election, allowing the voter registration program to be conceded forward as it went on. These issues have contributed to a great deal of uncertainty in the Afghan society on the sustainability and credibility of the electoral process. The lack of confidence in the voter registration process caused a part of the Afghan society to question the reliability of the entire electoral process (Asian Network for Free Elections 2004).

The voter registration for 2005 Wolesi Jirga and the Provincial Council elections were fulfilled in three phases. Phase 1 started before 2004 Presidential elections and continued further covering the major urban areas of Afghanistan. Phase 2 spread the process to the provincial areas and phase three registered people in rural areas where most of the population lives which continued until one month before elections. Around twelve million voters became eligible to vote for the 249 seats in Wolesi Jirga, the lower house of Parliament, and for the 34 provincial councils. The voter turnout was approximately 48 percent, which was well below previous Presidential elections.

The voter registration period for the 2009 Presidential elections was from 6th October 2008 to 2nd February 2009. Around 4.5 million Afghan people were registered to vote during the process. IEC released this report in March 2009. In registration, the number of men was higher than number of women, the difference being about seven lakhs. The women were around “40 percent of all registered voters. Despite the weakening of security, the IEC launched the first of four phases of voter registration in October 2008 registering one million eligible voters in fourteen provinces in north, northeast, and central Afghanistan. A month later, second phase of registration was started in ten provinces, mainly in the north. The third and fourth phases of registration started in the unstable eastern and southern provinces and were expected to end before February 2009 but this went further up to March.

The 2010 Parliamentary elections were blemished with controversy regarding fake Voter ID cards. The rumour was that thousands of fake voters ID cards were on use during election time. These rumours were dismissed by the IEC. Many efforts were done to prevent multiple voting. The quality of ineradicable ink acting as marker to prevent multiple voting also remained a concern as several complaints from polling booths came regarding multiple voting According

to the report of 2009 by Free and Fair Elections Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA)“on voter registration, between 20 percent and 85 percent of observed centres issued multiple cards to single applicants during different points in the registration process”. Women’s registration was generally low throughout the country. In spite of all the efforts, “IEC staff failed to prevent widespread proxy registration by individuals.

Political Parties and their Positions

Article 2 of the Constitution of Afghanistan defines a political party as an organized society consisting of individuals which undertakes activities for attaining its political objectives, locally and/or nationwide, based on the provisions of this law and its own constitution. Article 3 describes that, the political system of the State of Afghanistan is based on the principles of democracy and pluralism of political parties. The constitution also clearly describes safeguards for regulating political parties. Article 6 specifies that Political parties shall not: pursue objectives that are opposed to the principles of the holy religion Islam; use force, or threaten with, or propagate, the use of force; incite to ethnic, racial, religious or regional discrimination; create a real danger to the rights and freedom of individuals or intentionally disrupt public order and security; have military organizations or affiliations with armed forces; receive funds from foreign sources.

After the fall of the Taliban on 2001, the Bonn Process initiated the post-war reconstruction of Afghan political institutions. The groups, which had worked earlier as military factions, had established wide management and organizational structures and these permitted the military factions to control resources and public recognition in the post-Taliban era. A Political Parties Law was approved in September 2003, and several groups gave application for registration as formal political parties. These included former military groups, which had clearly identified leaders and maintained a strong local authority in the regions they formerly controlled support among ethnic groups. A number of new parties were also registered, most of which were formed in secret under the Taliban regime or had formerly existed as civil movements. Most of them were smaller than the established regional and ethnic parties were, and did not have the resources to compete with the groups that had ties to the anti-Soviet struggle. Most of the new parties formed in the post-Taliban period appealed for support formal ethnic groups. In

the lead up to the parliamentary and provincial council elections of 2005, 86 political parties were formally registered (National Democratic Institute 2011).

Over the last few years, political parties have got improvements in electoral performance. In the 2009 presidential and provincial council elections, around hundred parties were registered. For the provincial council elections around 30 parties fielded candidates. However, over 80 percent of the 3,197 candidates were registered as independents. A New Party Law was introduced in late 2009 in the parliament that changed the requirements for party registration and obliged parties to re-register. Only five parties were able to complete this process before the ballot in September 2010 parliamentary elections. Several parties mobilized candidates for the 2010 parliamentary polls and currently, 21 parties have representatives in the new *Wolesi Jirga*."Political parties are developing slowly in Afghanistan; these are fragmented due to ethnic politics, but are starting to shed their former armed legacy (National Democratic Institute 2011).

Third Party Assessment of Elections

At the invitation of the IEC, the United Nations Electoral Affairs Division is conducting a mission, namely NAM (Needs Assessment Mission) in Afghanistan. Afghanistan managed the Presidential election in 2014. The IEC requested that in view of the large-scale preparations required for elections it would be valuable if the United Nations Needs Assessment Mission could be undertaken as soon as possible (UNDP Report 2015). The assessment is a United Nations (UN) mechanism to consider the most appropriate forms of UN electoral assistance. The IEC was giving preference to make voter registration as fair and free. It could be done by administering electoral reforms on time and successfully within a limit.

Undoubtedly, administering a large national election is a huge task. During the Presidential election of 2009 as well as national elections, IEC has tried its level best to conduct polls in a free, fair and efficient manner. IEC opines that it was trying for certain measures to prevent fraud in the election. Codes of conduct were developed for government employees and security forces so that elections could be free and fair. It wants to make sure that the government's resources should not be used in favour of any candidate and that government employees obey the rules of the IEC during the elections. To prevent fraud in the election, votes are counted at

the polling station in the presence of representatives from political parties, civil society and the media (National Democratic Institute 2017).

Domestic and international election observers said these problems should be addressed to make the confidence in the independence of Afghan election machinery. A program was organized in Kabul in September 2012 by the FEFA (Free and Fair Elections Foundation of Afghanistan) in partnership with NDI. The participants of this program developed a concrete and tangible plan to advance key reforms in electoral process of Afghanistan. These included:

- “Protecting the independence of the electoral bodies as – the Independent Electoral Commission, the Electoral Complaints Commission and the Candidate Voting Commission;
- Ensuring fairness and transparency in the conduct of these electoral management bodies, with the goal of enhancing public trust and ensuring justice;
- Encouraging political parties to nominate qualified male and female candidates, and engage in transparent reporting of campaign contributions and expenses.
- Developing a new identification system based on a national census in order to evaluate candidates accurately and identify fake voter ID cards;
- Conducting several elections simultaneously, if possible;
- Introducing a collaborative tracking system that will confirm the progress of the elections as well as the performance of the election management bodies;
- Amending articles of the election law to improve electoral fairness and transparency. The group also appealed to the international community and organizations to support the Afghan efforts to promote credible elections. This was particularly in the areas of financial accountability, political participation of voters across the country, and the political empowerment of women and minority communities” (National Democratic Institute 2017).

Conclusion

It is important to decide how elections are conducted in healthy competitive manner among political parties, how the voting behaviour shows political the choices of the people, and how the determination of which political leader will form the government for the next few years. In

any democratic country, independent electoral institutions cover a huge number of responsibilities. Some alternatives entail breaks in the electoral system into its component parts which focus on the mechanics of how votes are translated into seats (Carter and Farrell 2009).

The famous writer on electoral issues distinguished two main components of an electoral system: 'district magnitude electoral formula' and 'ballot structure'. To evaluate an electoral system or to choose a new one, it is necessary to ask first what an electoral system will do. Every electoral system, if it is democratic, represents the voters – in much or less (Rae 1967). In democracy, an electoral system would be more effective, if that represents more voters. It is also true that no electoral system can represent the voters fully.

According to Horowitz, six goals of an electoral system are fundamental to understand before applying it in any state. "Some of these are mutually compatible, but some others are mutually incompatible; it is so important to understand about what one is choosing". These six possible goals are following: "1) proportionality of seats to votes; 2) accountability to constituents; 3) durable governments; 4) victory of the 'Condorcet winner'; 5) inter-ethnic and interreligious conciliation; and 6) minority office holding" (Horowitz 2003).

Electoral systems can be powerful institutions for shaping of the current politics in societies such as Afghanistan. The present condition of Afghanistan's electoral mechanisms shows that there is no perfect electoral system as such. The Presidential elections and the subsequent assembly elections faced the fearsome challenge of transforming Afghanistan. Hamid Karzai's victory and Afghanistan's improved electoral system appear to represent an important step toward democracy. Yet, elections and electoral mechanisms are a necessary but insufficient means to the endurance of constitutional democratic government and its framework. The legitimacy of Afghanistan's new democratic institutions will rest on the government's progress in producing results, such as disarming the private militias of powerful commanders, and reduction the burgeoning poppy cultivation (Riphenburg 2007: 1). Some of these militias represent sizeable ethnic minorities. An effective electoral system is that system only which brings in progressive governments and performs to move forward for achieving goals of democracy.

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