



Q&A

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Afghanistan's Low-turnout Election, Insecurity and Unsettled Prospects for Peace

Afghanistan's fourth presidential election since 2001 brought perhaps 26 per cent of the electorate to the polls. In this Q&A, Crisis Group consultant Graeme Smith and Senior Analyst Borhan Osman explain the weak participation rate and explore the contest's implications for the country's stability.

What happened in Saturday's Afghan presidential election?

Results will emerge slowly in the 28 September Afghan presidential election – the country's fourth in its short post-2001 democratic history. Although both leading campaigns have already claimed a first-round victory, official preliminary tallies are not expected to be released until mid-October. Even then, the vote count will be subject to certification, which will come after electoral bodies adjudicate complaints about the process. If the official count shows no candidate gaining more than 50 per cent of the vote, a second round will be required. It is unlikely that a second round could be held until the spring, because winter

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weather makes voters' access to polling places too difficult.

The contest features an incumbent, President Ashraf Ghani, who enjoys a high degree of control over the state apparatus and a strong likelihood of fending off the dozen challengers seeking to replace him. Ghani's strongest rival, Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, had become his reluctant partner in a unity government after disputed election results in 2014 led to a political crisis. That crisis ended with a U.S.-brokered power-sharing arrangement.

Election day came after an unusually muted campaign period. Campaigning ahead of previous presidential polls saw contenders charter aircraft, fill stadiums and deliver speeches across the country. In contrast, the 2019 season was relatively quiet, with few rallies, and with candidates who seemed uninterested in spending money or risking lives on large-scale campaigns.

How many people voted?

Turnout was low. Although preliminary results will not be out for weeks, election officials are already estimating that about 2 or 2.5 million voters came to the polls. Those numbers may decrease as some ballots are deemed fraudulent and other votes are thrown out for technical violations. The likely number of final valid votes is hard to forecast because this is the first time Afghanistan has used biometric systems for voter verification in a presidential election.

The top end of the current estimated turnout range is 26 per cent of 9.6 million registered voters, a lower turnout than in any other election in Afghanistan – and, in fact, among the weakest turnouts for any national election around the world in recent history. (The largest database of turnouts is maintained by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, which contains only a few examples of voters staying away from the polls on such a scale.)

The turnout figures are likely to be weaker still when considered as a percentage of the eligible electorate. Registration efforts have had disappointing results, capturing only about half of the voting-age population. Approximately half of Afghanistan's estimated population of about 35 million is eighteen or older and therefore eligible to vote. (Afghanistan has never had a complete census, so these figures are not precise and total population estimates vary by several million.)

Why was participation so low?

Afghanistan is a divided country, with all major urban zones under the central government's control and a large portion of the countryside in the hands of the Taliban insurgency. The Taliban – who regard the Afghan government as a U.S. puppet and therefore see presidential elections as illegitimate – threatened to disrupt the polls violently and pressed their supporters to boycott. After reports of low turnout emerged, the Taliban issued a statement thanking Afghans for shunning a “staged” process. Election authorities kept almost a third of polling centres closed, attributing their decision to security concerns. Voter frustrations with politicians and apathy might have been factors as well.

The Afghan government blamed Taliban violence for keeping Afghans from reaching the polls, and to some extent this may have been the case. A New York Times tally suggested that casualties on election day so far appear to be roughly in keeping with recent daily averages for the war, which ranks as the deadliest armed conflict in the world (measured by people

killed directly in fighting). Although there were no mass-casualty incidents, the Afghanistan Analysts Network has so far counted about 400 smaller attacks that appear to reflect a pattern of voter intimidation by the Taliban. A burst of gunfire or a few mortars landing near a polling station appeared to be sufficient in many places to dampen enthusiasm for the process. Although Afghan security forces were deployed in large numbers to secure the voting process, the Taliban probably could have done more both to disrupt the polls and to inflict greater casualties if the group had decided to mount full-throttled attacks on polling sites – along the lines, for example, of the 17 September Taliban suicide attack at a Ghani campaign rally that killed 26 people.

What does the election mean for stability?

Elections are usually a slow burn in Afghanistan, as results trickle out, how well (or not) the electoral bodies performed becomes clearer and politicians size up their opportunities. Street demonstrations or other forms of instability can occur weeks or months after voting. That said, the risk of a serious disruption to Kabul politics appears somewhat lower than in 2014, as Abdullah's ability to challenge an unfavourable result may be weaker. As in the 2014 election, Abdullah quickly declared himself the winner, flanked by prominent supporters at a 30 September press event. This time around, however, Abdullah was missing his biggest supporter from 2014: the former governor of Balkh province, Atta Noor, a wealthy northern power-broker whose coterie has voiced support for President Ghani in recent days. Ghani himself has not declared victory in public, but one of his senior aides in Kabul told Crisis Group that the Palace

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is confident of a first-round win, and his running mate, Amrullah Saleh, has said so publicly.

What does the election mean for the peace process?

The election does not have immediate consequences for the likelihood of success of the on-and-off diplomacy to end the war, although it might affect its timing, especially in the case of serious contestation over the results. But the key question for now is whether and when the U.S. intends to revive its own efforts to negotiate a settlement of the conflict, and in particular its talks with the Taliban.

The U.S. suspended the peace process in early September when President Donald Trump declined to move ahead with an initial U.S.-Taliban deal aimed at opening the way to broader talks among the Taliban, Afghan government and other Afghan power-brokers. The ball remains in Trump's court: Taliban officials have

told Crisis Group they are still open to resumption of the process. Senior Afghan officials said they would be willing to explore a diplomatic short-cut after the election process is completed, skipping the U.S.-Taliban deal and moving directly to intra-Afghan negotiations – but this has been a longstanding red line for the Taliban, who refuse to negotiate an Afghan political settlement without first resolving with the U.S. the question of foreign troop withdrawal. The Afghan government will be no better able to get the Taliban to erase that red line after the election, even if the announcement of results and reactions to them cause little or no political disturbance. Still, the Afghan government has renewed its commitment, at least rhetorically, to forging ahead with the peace process. On the day after the election, Ghani's regional peace envoy Omar Daudzai tweeted optimistically that peace would be “accomplished within 2019”.