

## Let the Afghans vote when they're ready

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### Hamid Karzai in Washington

**NEW YORK** When President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan comes to the White House on Tuesday, the most convincing show of support he could receive from President George W. Bush would be a statement lifting the pressure on Afghanistan to hold its elections before the U.S. presidential election.

The statement should be accompanied by clear commitment to the total demobilization of militias, building a national administration, extending an international security umbrella to the provinces and establishing an antidrug policy that cuts off profits to traffickers while providing livelihoods for farmers who depend on opium.

Afghanistan is currently planning to hold its first ever direct presidential election and elections to the lower house of Parliament in September. Since harsh weather makes some regions inaccessible soon after, the next possible date for elections is spring 2005. Yet none of the elements needed for free and fair elections is in place.

Security continues to deteriorate because of Taliban attacks, power struggles among warlords and banditry. The burgeoning opium trade funds all of these. Voter registration is accelerating, but may not meet the target for credible participation. In the face of resistance from warlords, the government and the United States continue to avoid dissolving the militias that threaten security.

The Afghan cabinet passed the electoral law only four months before the planned elections, leaving many potential candidates little time to register and campaign. The president and other key political figures have not even decided whether the election should be a legitimization of the status quo, a referendum on a new order, or an all-out contest among different political visions.

Many Afghans believe that the only reason for the rush to elections is to provide Washington with an exit strategy. After both the U.S. and Afghan elections, they believe, Washington wants to declare victory in Afghanistan and focus all available resources on Iraq.

Of course, it is not only the Bush administration that is pressing for quick elections: Karzai has also insisted on subjecting his presidency to popular scrutiny. Nor does Bush - or John Kerry - intend to walk away from Afghanistan after the election.

Nonetheless, the low-cost way in which the Bush administration has tried to pursue its policies in Afghanistan while focusing resources on Iraq has strengthened these suspicions, in Afghanistan and outside.

So Bush should take this opportunity to signal clearly that U.S. support is not conditional on the elections being held in September.

The advantages of a credible election are obvious. The goal of the transition process has been to create successively more legitimate Afghan governments, culminating in a fully representative government chosen through free and fair elections. It is becoming increasingly obvious, however, that elections in September would not be free or fair. The experience of postconflict operations shows that elections without security and sufficient political consensus on the rules of the game lead to governments that are less legitimate and effective, not more.

For the majority of Afghans, the most disheartening aspect of the run-up to the election is the temporizing with leaders whose crimes in the early 1990s paved the way for the Taliban. Washington and the Afghan government have caved in to the resistance to dissolving the 10th Division, a militia unit based near Kabul implicated in many killings that is involved to this day in terrorizing the people of western Kabul.

Karzai's recent meetings with leaders of this and other militias have aroused suspicions that the Afghan president, with U.S. backing, is prepared to share power with the tainted militia leaders - which he denies. Afghans perceive this as consistent with the suspected U.S. exit strategy - quick elections and an alliance of Karzai and anti-Taliban warlords.

It is up to Bush and Karzai to dispel these suspicions by clearly articulating a joint agenda of demobilizing militias, strengthening the government and affirming that elections will be held only when people can truly vote.

True, if elections are postponed, Karzai cannot simply lengthen his term by decree. The new constitution wisely sets no date for the elections, but the president will have to reconvene the loya jirga, or tribal assembly, that adopted that constitution to reschedule the vote. Bush - and Kerry - should declare that the U.S. government will remain committed to the Afghans throughout such a process, and beyond.

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