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Afghanistan: September 18 Elections Mark A New Beginning

By Emily Hsu
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As Afghanistan counts the ballots from its first-ever parliamentary election on September 18, experts say the most daunting challenges reside not in the election itself, but what the parliament will look like when the votes are in.

"Counting the ballots and getting people to accept the results will be challenging, but even more challenging will be getting the National Assembly to function once it's there," said Dr. Barnett Rubin, chair of the U.S. Institute of Peace Afghanistan Working Group.

As Afghans and the international community ramped up for the elections, experts met September 12 in the Institute's Afghanistan Working Group to discuss [upcoming challenges](#) to the country's fledgling democracy. Speakers included Patrick Fine, former mission director in Afghanistan for the U.S. Agency for International Development, and Judy Benjamin, former senior technical adviser in Afghanistan to the UN Development Program. Rubin moderated the discussion. The following USIPeace Briefing summarizes the views expressed at the meeting.

Absence of Political Parties Could Pose Problems

The marked absence of strong political parties among the candidates could be problematic for future relations between the executive and legislative branches. Of the 5,800 candidates running for office on Sunday, 5,000 are "independent." Only 12 percent of the contenders are affiliated with a political party.

Without a strong political support base in Parliament, Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai could find it difficult to exercise executive power effectively, experts said. Karzai, who does not head a party of his own, has no institutional tools by which to manage Parliament and would have to do so "extra-institutionally," according to Fine.

Moreover, none of the existing parties has an agenda that is national in scope; instead, most are committed primarily to the interests of their specific communities and constituents. The introduction of so many new and potentially independent political voices among the 249 seats in the lower house (Wolesi Jirga) could threaten Afghanistan's national unity by creating a factional parliament vulnerable to political impasse.

Former Warlords and the Potential Narco-State

Another concern involves candidates who continue to rely on the illicit narcotics trade to fund their political activities. Although several candidates were disqualified for their links to illegal armed groups, a number of contenders with ties to the drug trade remained on the ballot, according to Rubin. With limited international funding available, many remain heavily dependent on opium revenues to execute their campaigns and reach out to voters.

The country's narcotics revenues equal twice the amount of foreign assistance in Afghanistan and six times the government's budget, Rubin said. As has long been the case, the costs of local governance in Afghanistan are often covered by illicit drug money.

If these candidates are elected, their lingering links to the narcotics trade could destabilize the country's democracy and undermine efforts to eradicate corruption in the government, the speakers agreed. The issue is especially critical for the upcoming election – the most important function of Parliament is to oversee the expenditure of public funds.

Women Continue An Uphill Climb

While conditions for women in the Afghan political process have improved markedly in recent years, women continue to face disproportionate challenges to their candidacies, according to Benjamin. In addition to threats of violence to themselves and their families, female candidates frequently lack social networking skills that are imperative in vibrant democratic processes. Moreover, lower literacy rates among women make them more susceptible to influence by their male counterparts in the political process.

To increase the political role of women in the government, the Afghan constitution sets aside 68 seats in the Wolesi Jirga for women; at least one woman is guaranteed election in each province. Realizing the strategic value of these guaranteed seats, some Afghan warlords have propped up female candidates to run on the warlords' behalf, Benjamin said. Training programs are under way to educate candidates on what to expect from the political process, Benjamin added. The ultimate goal should be promotion of men in government who appreciate expanding the role of women in the political process.

Election Preparations: A Logistical Challenge

Post-election concerns aside, the conduct of the election was a monumental logistical and technical undertaking. With 5,800 candidates on the ballot and up to 30,000 polling stations across the country, the election required about ten times the logistical task of the 2004 presidential elections and has cost Afghans a total of \$159 million. Roughly 40 million ballots, 130,000 ballot boxes and 140,000 bottles of ink were distributed across the country, as international and Afghan security forces organized to prevent attacks against polling stations on election day, according to the Joint Electoral Management Body, a UN-Afghan organization that oversees voter registration and elections.

On the whole, it is very clear the Afghan people want to execute their right to vote, Fine said. About 12 million Afghans registered to vote prior to the election; preliminary results are to be announced early October.

Looking Forward

The September 18 election will mark the completion of the "Bonn Process," a UN-brokered plan to chart out the country's path to democracy following two and a half decades of war. The post-Bonn agenda includes consolidating democracy and building democratic institutions, civil society and a rule of law, Rubin said.

The election is a crucial event for the Afghan people, as it will shape the course of the country's young democracy and determine whether it can triumph over a long history of war and poverty. Key questions yet to be answered include what coalitions or ethnic divisions may emerge, which candidates will support the president, and what commitments new leaders will have to upholding democratic principles and building Afghan institutions.

Related Resources:

- [A Preview of Elections in Afghanistan: Challenges and Opportunities](http://www.usip.org/pubs/usipeace_briefings/2005/0923_afghanistan.html)

Event, September 2005 (Audio)

- [Establishing the Rule of Law in Afghanistan](#) Special Report, March 2004
- [Afghanistan](#) USIP Activity Overview
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This USIPeace Briefing was written by Emily Hsu, Research Assistant in the [Peace and Stability Operations](#) program at the Institute of Peace. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies. For additional information about this USIPeace Briefing or other Institute activities, please contact the Office of Congressional and Public Affairs at publicaffairs@usip.org or at (202) 429-3832.

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