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Afghanistan: Old Problems, New Parliament, New Expectations

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With the September 18 parliamentary elections, Afghanistan completes its internationally mandated [blueprint for democracy](#) and enters a new phase of state building in uncharted waters. This transition occurs against the backdrop of rising threats to security and an economy dominated largely by illicit production and [export of opium](#).

On October 12, 2005, the U.S. Institute of Peace convened a meeting of the Afghanistan Working Group to review the recent parliamentary elections. The presenters at the meeting included Robert Varsalone, resident country director for Afghanistan for the International Republican Institute; Sam Zia-Zarifi, research director for the Asia Division of Human Rights Watch; Larry M. Sampler, former chief of staff for the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan; and Barnett R. Rubin, chairman of the Afghanistan Working Group. The following USIPeace Briefing summarizes views expressed at the meeting. The views expressed here do not reflect those of the Institute, which does not take positions on policy issues.

Good News, Bad News Underscores Afghanistan's Continuing Struggles

Afghanistan's parliamentary elections, held on September 18, 2005, suffered from a surprisingly low turnout. Even in Kabul, where security was not an issue, turnout was around 36 percent. The presenters cited a number of different causes including: letters threatening candidates; voter intimidation (especially in the south and southeast); massive confusion about the voting system; skepticism about ballot secrecy; fear of [warlord retribution](#); and overall disappointment with democracy's dividends. The presence of numerous candidates and political bosses linked to armed groups and nefarious past behavior further dampened voter enthusiasm.

Despite these challenges, some hopeful signs emerged. Violence on election day was minimal and Afghanistan's newly minted, fledgling police and national army performed well in securing polling centers. Women candidates, many of whom received death threats, beat powerful opponents, in some cases by large margins. Finally, many independent candidates survived the complicated voting process.

The post-election drama is still unfolding. Ninety percent of the voluminous list of candidates for Parliament will necessarily lose. According to Rob Varsalone, "The electoral system set itself up to fail. Even if the election is perfect and fraud-free, the vast majority of candidates will end up losers and they will all think that they were robbed." Widespread challenges to vote counts are expected in the coming month as results are announced and disappointed candidates object to the process. The speakers also warned of the possibility of political assassinations.

Taliban Lose, Warlords Triumph, and Women Get a Seat at the Table

According to recent polls and interviews, Afghans today say they are less fearful of the Taliban, who failed to disrupt the elections. They express greater apprehension about the rising power of the country's warlords, who won many seats for themselves and their supporters in Parliament. Many of these warlords, who rule their regions through intimidation, will add the legitimacy of a Parliamentary mantle to cement their power.

Women candidates also fared well. By law, women must occupy 68 out of the 249 seats in the Parliament (Wolesi Jirga), but women garnered enough votes to fill the seats without application of the law. Most notably, Malalai Joya, an outspoken women's rights advocate and vocal critic of the warlords, triumphed.

According to Varsalone, some candidates who ran independently may begin to align with political parties or form coalitions among themselves. Experts also pointed out the potential for a pro-Karzai bloc, which will be important in avoiding an impasse between the executive and legislative branches.

Disappointment Grows in Democracy's Dividends

The disappointing turnout on election day reflects mounting disillusionment among the electorate about the benefits of democracy. Many Afghans who had voted in the 2004 presidential elections said they did not feel motivated to vote this time because nothing had improved as a result of the first election. The judicial system is still ineffective in cracking down on criminal activities, as armed warlords still control local regions through intimidation. Afghans are concerned less about the immediate threat of violence and more about impunity – the knowledge that if they are attacked, nothing would be done, Zia-Zarifi said.

Many Afghans are annoyed that warlords were allowed to run for office, rather than being tried for criminal misbehavior in the past. Many said they preferred to vote for women because "at least their hands are clean," Zia-Zarifi noted. At the same time, Afghans fear that women, even if elected, may not have the power to stand up to armed warlords.

Sampler emphasized that the international community could be "losing the hearts and minds" of the Afghan people as warlords appear to be winning at the polls. The hope among the internationals was that "the warlords would be beaten at the ballot box," Varsalone said. The fear now is election of a Parliament that relives old disputes with dominating mid-level commanders with brutal pasts. There is a risk that the Parliament will pass laws it cannot enforce and spend money it does not have.

What is the Next Chapter?

The parliamentary elections completed the "Bonn Process"—the plan designed by the international community and representatives of post-Taliban Afghanistan in December 2001 to help the country embark on a path to democracy. According to Rubin, a new plan to follow the Bonn plan, "the Kabul Agenda," will be the subject of a donors conference to be held in London in January 2006. Other changes loom as NATO assumes control of the peacekeeping mission and the United Nations adjusts to senior staff turnover.

Afghanistan is "like a glass half-full, perched on a buffet table on the Titanic." The "icebergs" in front of the Titanic described by Larry Sampler, include lack of rule of law or a functioning civil service to run a legitimate and effective government. Afghanistan remains a "war zone." Nevertheless, there are some optimistic signs including strong Afghan support for a unified, democratic state and increased understanding among the international community that the problems must be tackled with greater assistance. As Sampler reminded the audience, "We won't reach the aspirational best, but we can't be allowed to fail either."

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