AN ELECTION OBSERVER'S VIEW AND APPRAISAL OF THE 2014 AFGHAN ELECTIONS

Srinjoy Bose

Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

ABSTRACT

In April and June 2014, Afghanistan conducted its first democratic transition of power. This commentary provides a first-hand account and appraisal of the conduct of the elections, and begins by capturing first the atmospherics of polling day, and then reviews some lasting impressions of the same. After identifying some of the common themes and strands that characterised the polling—including, polling procedures, individual and/or team performances of election officials, logistical shortcomings, and the security measures put in place, etc.—the commentary concludes by advocating for the continued improvement (best practices) of the electoral enterprise.

Keywords: Afghanistan; Elections; Independent Election Commission (IEC); Fraud; Logistics; Instrumentalities; Security

INTRODUCTION

On April 5, and June 14, 2014, I served as an international election observer—"Special Guest" accredited by Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission (IEC)—and observed polling conducted in Kabul. On both occasions I partnered and observed with teams of international observers comprising of scholars and analysts with several decades' experience of writing on Afghanistan. On April 5, my four-member team (travelling in a convoy of two vehicles) visited a total of ten polling centres in Kabul at which votes were being cast or counted for the presidential and provincial council elections. In addition to observing and documenting polling procedures, the team was keen on capturing the atmospherics of polling day. Smaller teams were organised for the June run-off in order to a) minimise potential security risks (larger convoys attract unwanted attention), and b) survey/observe polling at more districts and neighbourhoods. Thus on June 14 my two-member team, visited a total of thirteen polling centres in Kabul at which votes were being cast or counted for the presidential run-off election. This time my team was keen to contrast the atmospherics with the elections of April 5. The following notes briefly reflect my experiences observing Afghanistan's historic—the 2014 Presidential elections mark the first ever

democratic transfer of power in Afghanistan's history—national elections.

It is important to indicate that this commentary does not assess the implications of the recently concluded unity government deal (power-sharing) or the political process, per se. Instead, the commentary provides a first-hand account and appraisal of the conduct of the elections. The paper begins by capturing first the atmospherics of polling day, and then reviews some lasting impressions of the same. After identifying some of the common themes and strands that characterise the polling—including, polling procedures, individual and/or team performances of election officials, logistical shortcomings, and the security measures put in place, etc.—the commentary concludes by advocating for the continued improvement (best practices) of the electoral enterprise.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF AFGHAN ELECTIONS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Afghanistan's first ever, direct presidential election was held on 9 October 2004, followed by parliamentary elections on 18 September 2005. The IEC estimated that about 70% of Afghanistan's then estimated 12 million registered voters (approximately 8 million) cast their ballots. Hamid Karzai won the presidency with 55.4% of the vote (Independent Election

Commission, 2004). In the 2005 parliamentary elections, voter turnout dropped by 20% to 50% (approximately 6.4 million voters), and warlords and women gained more seats in the lower house and provincial councils than had been anticipated. Both the presidential and parliamentary races were marred by allegations of political manoeuvring—potential candidates dropping out of the race in return for promises of political office—and irregularities (including several cases of voter over-registration which indicates fraud).

The 2009 presidential election witnessed a significant drop in voter turnout: 38.7% in 2009 as opposed to 70% in 2004. The incumbent Hamid Karzai won 49.7% of the vote, indicating substantial support across ethnic and tribal lines (Independent Election Commission, 2009). Fraud was once again a concern, and in much greater scale than in 2004/2005; irregularities including ballot stuffing and intimidation of voters were widely reported by several candidates, their campaigns, and the media. The elections were also marred by insurgent violence targeted against ordinary citizens, elections officials, and security personnel. The multi-national International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) recorded 400 incidents on election day.

The 2014 presidential election was the third presidential poll since the fall of the Taliban, and was contested by eleven candidates (three of whom had withdrawn from the race prior to the April election). The incumbent Hamid Karzai was constitutionally barred from contesting the elections. Opinion polls showed Dr. Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah as front-runners. A former academic and World Bank employee, Ghani had served as Afghanistan's Finance Minister between 2002-2004. An ethnic Pashtun, Ghani selected the Uzbek strongman General Abdul Rashid Dostum, and the Hazara politician Sarwar Danish, as his first and second vice-presidential running-mates. During the lead up to election day, observers and analysts speculated that Ghani would receive a majority of the Pashtun and Uzbek votes. Ghani's closest challenger was Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, who was Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2001-2005. Abdullah forged a name in politics as a senior member of the Northern Alliance and worked as an advisor to the late anti-Soviet and anti-Taliban leader, Ahmad Shah Massoud. Abdullah selected the Pashtun politician Mohammad Khan and the Hazara strongman and politician Mohammad

Mohaqiq as his first and second vice-presidential running-mates. Abdullah was expected to command the majority of the Tajik and Hazara votes. Both Ghani and Abdullah had registered for the 2009 presidential campaign with the former securing only 3% of the total vote while Abdullah was runner-up to incumbent Hamid Karzai and secured 30.6% of the total vote.

Alongside the first presidential ballot, some 2,713 candidates, including more than 300 women, registered as provincial council candidates. The provincial council candidates campaigned for 458 seats, which are distributed among Afghanistan's 34 provinces using a population-based formula. Ninety six seats (20%) country-wide are reserved for women. Once elected, the council members will serve for a four-year term.

OBSERVING POLLING IN KABUL CITY

On both occasions, due to security constraints, my teams were forced to remain in Kabul city and observe different centres in its various neighbourhoods. The routes we selected to carry out our observations comprised of a number of neighbourhoods and districts with diverse ethnic populations: Khair Khana with a predominantly Tajik population; Qala-e Fatullah, with a mixed Pashtun, Tajik, and Hazara population; Kart-e Now with a predominantly Pashtun population; Kart-e Parwan, with a mixed Pashtun, Tajik, and Sikh population; Kart-e Sakhi, with a predominantly Hazara population (and smaller numbers of Tajiks and Pashtuns); Dar ul Aman; Bagh-e Qazi, with a predominantly Hazara population; Dasht-e Barchi, with a predominantly Hazara population; 6 Darak, with a mixed population; Makroyan, with a mixed population; Wazir Akbar Khan, with a mixed population; and finally, Taimani, with a mixed population.

I note that accurate ethnic and minority statistics are not available for Kabul, or indeed much of Afghanistan, due to the lack of census data. The breakdown provided above is based on the observations of several Kabul-based Afghan researchers (including members of Afghanistan's premier elections watchdog, the Free and Fair Elections Forum), I had occasion to converse with. Furthermore, the demography of Kabul is changing rapidly: in 2003, a University of Nebraska study funded by the National Geographic Society reported that Tajiks

comprised 45% of Kabul's population while Pashtuns comprised only 25% (National Geographic Society, 2003). While not disputing the report's findings, Kabul-based researchers mention that the percentage of Pashtuns has significantly increased during the twelve years since.

The breakdown notwithstanding, it must be noted that Kabul is a sprawling, urban city and in some areas families of different ethnic affiliation reside in close proximity to each other, tied together by the ethos and demands of capital life. Unlike in rural areas, Kabul's political life cannot be characterised as monolithic, determined by bloc or group affiliation; instead, it is dynamic, with group or bloc identification being replaced by more personalised interests and views (the role of the media is critical here). This helps Kabul stand apart from not just its rural counterparts, but other urban centres in geographic regions where ethnic compositions are less heterogeneous.

THE ELECTIONS ATMOSPHERE: ANXIETY AND HOPE

This section draws attention to the general atmosphere immediately prior to the April 5 election, and in the interim period *between* the two rounds of elections. The section paints a picture of both the anxieties and hopes of individuals and communities, their aspirations waiting to be realised via the ballot paper.

Between optimism and pessimism

During the lead up to the April 5 election, both foreign and Afghan observers—media persons, analysts, civil society advocates, etc.—sensed a change was in the offing. The political and social atmosphere in Afghanistan was palpable, exuding much promise. The youth in particular, many of who are actively involved in government and other institutions and agencies, were hopeful of reforms that a change in government could entail; regardless of which presidential candidate youths supported, they were united in their desire for change. Optimism among Afghanistan's youth was infectious.

Sensing the popular demand for a change in government, and the corollaries such a transition affects, the campaigns reached out to the masses. As one expert has noted, campaigns in Afghanistan, "aim to consolidate support, reach out to new constituencies and project an image

of success. This is done through large gatherings, often with lunch and transport costs provided" (Bijlert, 2009: 11). Thus, both candidates staged rallies to attract votes. The large turnout at these rallies is evidence of that desire for change. While it is difficult to predict future turnout numbers, supporters had been turning up for days in record numbers at rallies; Dr Abdullah's campaign rally in Panjsher, for example, brought nearly 50,000 supporters—a record figure for the city (Bose, 2014). While campaigns themselves were somewhat responsible for mobilising supporters (the youth in particular), the majority of Afghans showed genuine interest and enthusiasm for electoral competition.

The June 14 run-off election on the other hand witnessed a certain anxiety among Kabul's populace—several persons I interviewed were more sceptical of a positive outcome. The chief source of scepticism was the question of *legitimacy*: people felt a win for either Dr Abdullah or Dr. Ghani would be less legitimate because vast portions of Afghanistan's populations may not accept the electoral outcome. In such event, the government of Afghanistan would lack a unanimous mandate to govern, further eroding the writ of the state. And so in June the enthusiasm of the April poll was replaced by apathy; Kabul witnessed a lower voter turn-out.

What explains the lower turn-out in Kabul? First, voting in non-urban centres is much more structured and parties/candidates are able to mobilise votes better. In contrast, voting in urban centres tend to be more personalised. This is best exemplified by Kabuli youth who, somewhat surprisingly, *did not* vote in large numbers as expected. My discussions with youths indicated that they felt the outcome had been predetermined (deals brokered) and/or their solitary vote would not help determine the outcome anyway. The panacea for apathy is to assure voters that people's votes actually count. There is the perception among the populace that elite backroom dealings undermine both the democratic process and voter demands and aspirations. Regardless of the identity of the losing candidate, voters need to perceive that their votes count and their candidates are elected through the designated democratic process.

Nevertheless, the mass mobilisation of citizens is both a testament to the Afghan people's resilience and indicates the progress of the democratic project in the country; despite the

security risks and threats, the large numbers present at mass rallies and polling places was unheard of in Afghanistan's political history.

The insurgent threat

Prior to the elections, the international community were bracing themselves for a Taliban onslaught aimed at derailing the holding of elections. The militant group has been issuing statements for months, saying the April 5 vote for a successor to President Hamid Karzai is a western-backed sham election and they will stop at nothing to disrupt it by attacking election workers and infrastructure. They had even warned civilians that heading to polling stations on election day would be deadly. The insurgent threat made polling in scores of districts untenable, with nearly 1000 sites closed (threats and attacks prior to the June 14 poll saw approximately 200 *more* polling centres close).

The Taliban came good on their threats when they attacked the IEC headquarters in Kabul a mere week prior to the April 5 election (Carberry, 2014). Most of the violence on April 5, however, was minimal and concentrated in the eastern provinces that resulted in 20 casualties (Coren et al., 2014). In an attempt to explain the relative calm of polling day, *The Kabul Times* reported on 2 April 2014 that some analysts suspected discord within the Taliban ranks. A more plausible explanation, however, is that just as with the rest of the world, the Taliban, too, may have concluded the inevitability of a run-off and saved their worst for later. June 14 witnessed 150 attacks that resulted in 68 casualties (39 civilians and 29 security officials) (Trofimov et al., 2014). While some of the attacks were relatively minor (for example, the rocket attacks launched at Kabul airport but failed to hit the intended targets) others more heinous and grotesque—*BBC News* reports from Herat on 15 June 2014 (BBC, 2014) confirm a sordid story that the Taliban cut off the ink-stained forefingers of 11 persons who had voted recently, in a desperate attempt to dissuade voters from going to the polls.

Ethnic considerations and anxieties

In the first round, Dr Ghani experienced a heavy defeat. Many analysts and observers have explained the defeat by highlighting: a) the fractious nature of the Pashtun vote—the Pashtun vote was divided among several Pashtun candidates running for office. The three other major Pashtun candidates were Zalmay Rasoul, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, and Quayum Karzai. And b) General Dostum's (Dr Ghani's running-mate) failure to receive a larger portion of the Uzbek vote. Dr Ghani did not fare well in three provinces with significant Uzbek populations; he failed to garner 40% of the vote in Sar-e-Pul (39%), Samangan (27%), and Kunduz (38%) (Bose, 2014). Instead, Dr Abdullah won a plurality in all three provinces, helping propel him to a first-place finish countrywide. Following the defeat, Dr Ghani stepped up his campaign strategy, approaching the mullahs for their endorsement (which he got). He also addressed some campaign shortcomings: a) General Dostum barely campaigned outside of his stronghold area of Sheberghan, and Dr Ghani took it upon himself to bear the burdens of a gruelling campaign by calling on Pashtun communities to unite behind him. Towards achieving such, he also b) approached tribal elders in an *attempt* to secure the women's vote in the eastern provinces of Paktia, Logar, Paktika, Ghazni, etc. (Ruttig and Ibrahimi, 2014).

While members from the Ghani camp and a handful of analysts (see Clark, 2014) have claimed that rural women in these provinces *did* turn out in larger-than-expected numbers, estimates should be viewed critically. Given that the run-off election secured a higher %age (38% in June as compared to 33% in April) of female votes, it may appear that Dr Ghani was successful in securing women's votes in the eastern provinces. Should women have indeed turned out in larger numbers it would signal a remarkable shift in the provinces' history, the social conditions for which simply are *non-existent*. A higher women's turnout in the eastern provinces appears untenable: in 2004 and 2009, women in these provinces barely voted. In the April 2014 poll, women from these provinces barely accounted for the approximately 32% of the overall women's vote. It is doubtful that the rigid cultural norms would be amenable to dilution/reform (even if pragmatic) following a few weeks of campaigning and/or deal making.

Meanwhile, Dr Abdullah undermined the significant lead he held from the first round of elections by focusing the post-April 5 campaign strategy on pandering to the Northern Alliance/mujahideen base. Afghanistan's communities still recall the years of mujahideen rule, one rife with inter-ethnic strife. Pashtuns

and Hazara's who may have voted for Dr Abdullah the first time, for instance, would be troubled with the pro-mujahideen rhetoric. Even some Tajik youth and officials I interviewed expressed similar concerns; they felt Dr Abdullah would do himself no favours and should have invested his time between the two elections wooing the fence sitters and Pashtuns.

Role of media

Ensuring the credibility, inclusivity, and transparency of elections is critical to the future stability of Afghanistan. Here, the Afghan media (including social-media) played a critical role in the 2014 elections. Appreciating Afghanistan's first democratic transition of power, Afghan journalists and media persons rose to the task of fulfilling their roles in a professional and responsible manner, particularly in high risk, politically unstable provinces.

First and foremost, the wide coverage of the election process during the months preceding the elections played an important role in bringing awareness to citizens and encouraging them to participate in the elections. Political campaigns, too, recognised the potential of media exposure. In the 2009 elections, television stations were unable to get the two leading presidential candidates to have a public debate. Then, prior to the April 2014 elections, there were three televised debates featuring the top candidates, and more than 12 million people according to *TOLO NEWS*, which broadcast the debates, watched them.

In urban areas, the media helped mobilise individuals and communities by encouraging them to a) attend campaign rallies and speeches, b) discuss the value and importance of the democratic process and transition, and c) vote on election day. Without media coverage and influence the Presidential candidates would not have been able to draw large crowds at rallies and speeches—a necessary strategy that boasts (and exaggerates) their popularity and legitimacy. In a country where fraud is ubiquitous, the candidates need to demonstrate to their domestic constituencies and international backers that they can engender the votes necessary to govern. In addition, extensive media coverage of the campaigns helped voters form direct personal impressions of candidates and erode block voting—substantiated by how Dr Abdullah managed to generate 20% of the vote in Kandahar province.

In remote and provincial areas of Afghanistan the 'town hall' is often too dangerous a place for citizens to speak their minds, and women and young people's attendance is taboo. It is in these impoverished regions that local media provide the safest alternative public space for political engagement. Media provides a virtual town hall where all citizens can engage, debate, listen, and share information, aspirations and concerns. In the aftermath of the elections, several leading Afghan media campaign personalities acknowledged the positive impact of citizen journalists in reporting the elections. "Facebook and Twitter users helped us reach areas that our observers could not.... Social media was the best way to create a direct relationship with each campaign", claimed Jawed Faisal, a member of Abdullah Abdullah's campaign. Echoing Faisal's statement, Ahmad Shuja, a representative of the citizen journalist programme, *Paiwandgah*, said, "social media surveys enabled an understanding of people's priorities and demands" (*TOLO News*, 2014).

Despite these positive contributions, however, the media were *not* impartial to the elections process. On the elections days, media organisations and unions undertook to avoid reporting negative news that could undermine the elections process. Danish Karokhel, the head of a leading Afghan news agency, *Pajhwok Agency News*, mentions how the desire among some reporters for a high turnout was so strong, particularly in dangerous areas of the country where participation was very low in the 2009 vote, that they said they deliberately held back on reporting about violence that might dissuade potential voters (Ahmed and Zahori, 2014). The sentiments behind such actions reveal a sense of deep responsibility to facilitate the elections; a recognition that the media could have an influence on events; a remarkable development in a country with little history of press freedom.

WORKING TOWARDS REALISING AN EFFICIENT AND LEGITIMATE ELECTION

The elections enterprise tells a story: a story of both institutional triumph and shortcoming. This section describes the measures taken to ensure the efficient and legitimate transfer of power including, some of the critical *logistical* discrepancies that seized much of the public and international debate, the *technical* characteristics

of the elections process and lessons learned for the future therein, and finally, the *security* efforts and measures implemented to deny spoilers the opportunity to derail the electoral process.

Logistics

Both rounds of elections witnessed severe shortages in presidential ballot papers. The shortages should have been anticipated. During the first round of elections, and attempting to mitigate the prospects of fraud and irregularities, Afghan institutions issued only 600 ballot papers for every polling station. Yet, this is only a partial explanation for the shortage. Rather, and more significantly, both (former) President Karzai and the European Union should shoulder much of the blame: neither has been inclined politically to implement a voter-registration process that would help determine exact numbers of voters by district. The process would have ensured that the correct numbers of ballot papers were issued. The process need not be laborious and/or expensive: in fact, all the necessary information for the registry process is available on the *tazkira* identity cards of individuals; for the registry process, the information on the *tazkira* need only be 'extracted' (Bose, 2014).

Instead, and following the April 5 poll, the IEC announced that it would hold the run-off election between four to eight weeks' time. Four to eight weeks' time between elections is simply not enough to solve the issue of the shortage in ballot papers. For the run-off, band aid contingencies were put in place to counter any logistical shortfalls: all polling centres were supplied with a surplus of 5% extra ballots with specific centres that experienced severe shortfalls issued an additional 5% (bringing the total to 10% extra ballots at these centres). Despite these measures, and as observed by other observer teams, several polling centres ran out of ballot papers. IEC staffers and candidate agents complained to observer teams (including mine) that the IEC failed to deliver additional ballots, keeping the centres waiting for several hours (Bose, 2014).

The IEC decision to supply extra ballot papers is not the answer. Firstly, printing more ballot papers is a costly enterprise, particularly for an already struggling economy. Secondly, given the time-constraints and costs associated, how did the IEC determine how many more ballot papers to print and the distribution schema (without accurate voter-registry numbers, how does the Government and IEC determine which districts and centres get more)? Thirdly, and crucially, printing more papers contradicts the original intent of supplying polling stations with 600 ballot papers each—that of preventing potential fraud (Bose, 2014). The shortage in ballot papers has a root cause that will need to be addressed—perhaps in time for the 2015 Parliamentary and District Council elections. Let this, then, be a lesson to both the future government and its international partners: voter registry is a must and cannot be delayed.

Ballot shortages aside, the voting process itself proceeded fairly smoothly on both occasions (the June poll was much smoother, IEC officials having implemented some of the lessons learned). One sticking point following the April 5 poll was conspiratorial discussions pertaining to the long and snaking queues at polling stations. Candidate agents, members of the campaigns, and even media persons/analysts queried whether IEC staffers were complicit in an organised 'go-slow'—efforts designed to deny citizens their right to cast votes. At several polling stations, voting proceeded smoothly although my team members were struck that some of the electoral workers were moving at a much more laboured pace than others. There was nothing, however, to suggest that this was part of an organised 'go-slow' (Bose, 2014). Instead, logistical discrepancies are the consequence of a fledgling electoral process, coupled with the added logistical burden of conducting twin provincial and presidential elections. For the June 14 poll, the lack of a cumbersome provincial *and* presidential ballot ensured voter queues moved along quickly; the voting process could not be any simpler since voters had to choose between just two presidential candidates. This explains why several polling stations boasted of high voter counts by 10-11 a.m.; such was the ease with which the process progressed.

Instrumentalities

The 2014 Presidential run-off election has been marred by "industrial scale" levels of fraud committed by various actors entrusted with the governance of the country (see for example *The Economist*, 2014; Rosenberg and Ahmad, 2014). The Phrase "industrial scale" fraud is instructive as it denotes that elections institutions (and officials) are completely suborned to political actors. Why/when does "industrial scale" fraud

take place? It occurs when the dynamics of the polity are such that: (a) a technically correct election may not lead to a politically desirable outcome, and in such instance, the suspected outcome determines the mechanics of the process; and (b) both voters and electoral officers/staffers can be held hostage to the desires of the powerful. In such instance, elections are but a step away from ethnicisation, which is exactly what happened in the run-off and its aftermath.

Given the stakes involved in these elections, fraud was obviously the biggest concern. On the very day of the presidential run-off, the IEC Secretary-General, the Kabul Police Chief, General Zahir, of trying to commit fraud, accused Zia-ul-Haq Amarkhail. Allegedly, Amarkhail was caught red-handed trying to smuggle ballots out of the IEC headquarters with his son and two bodyguards. Whatever the outcome of pursuant investigations, the IEC will have to contend with further trust and legitimacy deficits.

There are also concerns with the IEC projections. Several observers and analysts opine the turnout was *not* as high as the IEC are inclined to suggest, and place the turnout figure at a more modest figure. Numbers speak volumes, and the evidence raises questions: for instance, Ashraf Ghani is rumoured to have received 1.2 million votes from the three stronghold provinces of Khost, Paktia, and Paktika where the total number of registered voters are less than this number. This suggests 100% or more of registered voters including women voted (Stancati et al., 2014). The total number of votes from these provinces was 1/3 of the estimated 1.2 million in the April 5 elections. It should be noted, however, that not all voters are registered and different identity cards are admissible. Therefore, a better and more reliable indicator for fraud is the number of ballot papers cast that exceed the number of ballot papers allocated per centre: Khost, Ghazni, and Paktia all indicate numbers in excess of 600/station. Typically, 100% utilisation of ballots or 600+ votes (i.e. exceptionally high turn-out in excess of ballots issued), and multiple whole number figures ending with "0" are good indicators of fraudulent activity. Immediately after the June 14 poll, and whilst still in Kabul, I was receiving reports from fellow observer colleagues of ballot stuffing. Local and international observers were reporting that ballot boxes from far-flung polling centres arrived at the IEC headquarters in Kabul,

neatly stacked. That is, the individual ballots were not scattered in the tamper-proof sealed ballot boxes, but were neatly stacked one above another in columns, sometimes held together by elastic bands!

Ballot stuffing (for which Afghanistan is notorious), however, is not the only type of fraud that is of concern; manipulative activities erode trust in the electoral process and the institutions involved. Observer reports from around the country highlight subtle fraudulent behaviour, including candidate agents and IEC staffers urging voters to vote for particular candidates. Moreover, there appears to be *no* systematic process by which to distinguish between valid and "invalid/void" ballots. While the IEC had instructed specifically that only a "tick" mark is permissible, IEC staffers and candidate agents seemed unaware of this instruction (there were no visible instructions at polling stations we visited); instead, finger prints and signatures were being permitted, and that too often in favour of one candidate to the detriment of the other. The IEC instruction itself contradicts international electoral *best practices*: as long as the intention of the voter is clear—indicated by ticks, signatures (even outside the designated zone, as long as they do not interfere with other candidates)—ballots cast should be considered valid. The question then is, does the IEC implement international best practices consistently? The answer is an emphatic 'no'.

How, then, does the IEC prevent electoral manipulation at polling centres? An atmosphere riddled with inconsistencies—such as staff invalidating perfectly legitimate votes—not only embarrasses the IEC, but also adds to the suspicion of fraud. Repetitions of such shortcomings will skew vote counts enough to level accusations of fraud against the overseeing institution, adding to the chaos. Hence, better training of IEC staff (and candidate agents) is a must. More importantly, perhaps, the IEC needs to improve its image, reputation, and legitimacy to be able to withstand both small and large-scale discrepancies.

The professionalism of IEC staffers, here, is critical to both perceptions of the IEC and to the proper and efficient conduct of an election. For the most part, staffers' professionalism was evident. On April 5, my team was struck by the professionalism of local IEC staff. On that polling day, we encountered several individuals who had been IEC workers or managers in previous

elections, and thus had accrued the necessary skills and experience to manage a successful process. I recall, for instance, my team arrived at a polling centre in Kart-e Parwan district to observe vote counting. The counting was conducted very effectively by the polling centre manager who at all stages informed candidate agents of what he and his staff proposed to do and how they proposed to do it. After the numbers of the tamper-proof seals on the presidential ballot box were read aloud for the candidate agents, the seals were cut, the box was opened and the ballot papers then held aloft one by one by staff so that the agents could see that each paper had been appropriately stamped by the IEC official who issued it. At this point, the manager held up each ballot paper, announced for whom it had been cast, and handed it to staff to put it in an appropriate pile for that candidate on a wide table that had been built out of cardboard boxes (Bose, 2014). Clearly, the extensive training program under the aegis of the IEC and international community proved critical to the polling success.

On June 14, however, my team witnessed **staffers and candidates' observers' influence** voting behaviour, blatantly (the manipulative activities I refer to earlier). In future, the IEC and internationals will need to impress upon their staff the responsibility and value of *neutrality*—people do not appreciate attempts by staffers (or candidate agents) to influence their vote. I would, therefore, strongly recommend the United Nations Development Programme, Afghan government, and IEC to consider implementing a process whereby outstanding Afghan electoral staff can be identified and rewarded—this is critical to ensuring competent staff are retained, allowing for institutional learning and development. Staffers also require more thorough training so as to minimise inconsistencies in management and conduct. More often than not, IEC staffers are unaware of the *role* of international observers, leading to suspicion and tension.

Security

While the international media—*Huffington Post* (Donati and Shalizi, 2014) and *The New York Times* (Nordland and Zahori. 2014) — focused on the insurgent attacks that took place (the March 20, 2014 Serena Hotel attack, the April 2, 2014 attack at the Interior Ministry) in the lead-up to the elections, there was little mention of the

scores that the ANSF *foiled*. The National Directorate of Security reported that the ANSF, including Special Forces, were responsible for foiling hundreds of attempted attacks: 140 in the single week prior to the April 5 poll (and an approximate total of 600 in the immediate weeks prior), and over 450 in the weeks leading up to the June 14 poll. These numbers tell a story; a story not only of the resolve of the Afghan government to dispel the Taliban threats, but also one of the ANSF coming of age. Without doubt, the massive turn-out on that first polling day was largely possible because of this success. Private conversations with ANSF personnel revealed around-the-clock work towards achieving a secure environment for polling.

Curiously, given the ANSF's March/April successes—compared to the 600 odd attacks prior to the April 5 poll, June witnessed only 150 attacks; this signifies a drop of almost 70% and heralds the professionalism and success of the security forces Hamid Karzai's sudden move to remove top security officials who had been celebrated for their work on the eve of the second round of elections came as a surprise (Graham-Harrison, 2014). Not only were the officials fired, charges—illegal detentions and desecration of mosques—were brought against the men who were to be tried in court. Whatever the motive behind the removal and charges, it negatively impacted the ANSF's ability to better counter future insurgent threats.

Unlike on previous occasions, security for the 2014 elections was the sole responsibility of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The Afghan Ministry of Interior in close co-operation and co-ordination with the IEC and the National Directorate of Security (NDS) was in charge of the security arrangements. During the first round, large numbers of ANSF (army and police) and NDS personnel were required to be on duty for approximately 24 hours from April 5 through closing of polls and ballot counting on April 5. The security provision relied on an established 'Ring of Steel' method, which included concentric rings of security responsibility, whereby a one kilometre radius of the polling centre was secured by army personnel supervised by the NDS; polling centre perimeter by police personnel supervised by the NDS; and the polling centres were manned by the police and NDS personnel. The electoral security plan was modified for the second round and on 14 June the one-kilometre radius was contracted to the

immediate vicinity of the polling centres.

CONCLUSION: LASTING IMPRESSIONS

April 5, 2014 may prove in hindsight to be a **turning point in Afghanistan's history. First, the** relatively peaceful polling day (the Interior Ministry confirmed a number of attacks along the eastern border) and the almost 60% voter turn-out are not just damning denunciations of the Taliban insurgency (depriving it of moral and political legitimacy), but a major victory for the electoral process itself. In spite of cold, wet, and muddy conditions, voters in Kabul were generally committed to and enthusiastic about the process. Though they waited patiently and quietly for the most part, they were assertive about exercising their rights. Throughout the day, at every centre and station, there was a readiness to joke and engage in banter which, given the security concerns and precautions, was surprising. While not without discrepancies (polling stations running out of ballot papers—a consequence of the lack of a voter-registration process—and centres reportedly closing at 1:30 p.m.), the election was a success for electoral competition, a necessary criterion for successful democratic transition.

Second, the overall voter turnout in Kabul on June 14 was considerably lower than on April 5. While the absence of long queues at polling centres—as observed by most international teams across the city—is not in itself evidence of this claim, an examination of voter log-sheets will attest this. There were, however, several centres in Pashtun neighbourhoods where polling stations exceeded their allocated ballot sheets. This indicates Pashtuns came out in large numbers to vote for Dr Ghani (presumably), while Tajik and Hazara neighbourhoods recorded lower votes cast (indeed, several observers are claiming Dr Abdullah failed to mobilise *new*—individuals and communities who had not voted in the first round of elections, or had voted for other candidates—Hazara voters, for instance).

Third, although the electoral process has come a long way since 2009, logistical shortcomings persist. While some issues experienced during the April 5 elections were addressed somewhat—for instance, the ballot paper contingencies—on polling days, the IEC, Home Ministry and Police will need to coordinate their operations better so as to ensure delivery of resources as and when required. Failure to deliver ballot papers to polling centres results in accusations of electoral manipulation levelled against the IEC and government. Perhaps more importantly, discrepancies between result sheet tallies and official IEC tallies need to be addressed. Following the April 5 elections, there were numerous reported cases of discrepancies between result sheets posted outside polling centres and the IEC tally. This resulted in loss of legitimacy for the IEC because the Electoral Complaints Commission basically accused the former of fraud. Measures need to be put in place to avoid such repetitions.

Fourth, on both occasions, the post-election campaign narratives (accusations of fraud and estimates of votes won) were in full-swing *immediately following* poll-closure—despite calls from the IEC and government to desist from such behaviour—indicating a premeditated strategy. During the April 5 elections, the leading candidates were blaming each other of fraudulent activity. Following the June 14 elections, candidates targeted the IEC, accusing it of fraud. Specifically, Dr Abdullah seemed to be blaming the IEC (and President Karzai) while Dr Ghani appeared to be accusing the government machinery, i.e. the Tajik-dominated police and armed forces. For millions of Afghans the elections were a source of hope. It is imperative for this reason that the candidates ensure the **people's faith in the electoral process by rising** above politics and assisting the various institutional mechanisms in their mutual struggle to achieve a strong and healthy democracy.

Finally, the 2014 elections fiasco—which had very nearly brought Afghanistan to the brink of civil crisis (if not civil war) and political standstill—teaches us that *premature localisation and indigenisation* of the elections process in Afghanistan (or elsewhere) is a bad idea. In this sense, the international community has been very naïve: for the UN, the short-term impact of elections was more critical than solving the entrenched problems (voter registration, etc.); this is buttressed by the change in the **international community's** rhetoric/narrative **which reflects a shift from striving for "free and fair elections" to insisting on "credible elections".**

With respect to the specific conduct of future elections, there are two potential solutions worth mentioning. Some electoral experts are of the opinion that the entire process of elections should be sub-contracted to the UN. Obviously

there is a question of who will foot the bill, but it is either that or a repeat of 2014 and having to spend US$147 million dollars on a fraught recount process (compare this figure to the internationally administered 2004 Presidential election - US$90 million). It is, however, difficult to see the Afghan government accepting such a solution. The alternative—and perhaps a more reasonable one at that—is to have international electoral experts embedded in both the IEC and EEC Secretariats, but in larger numbers than previously. This will provide both the necessary expertise for problem-solving *and* go a long way towards ensuring the independence of the said institutions. International political and diplomatic pressure on the Afghan government to accept this solution will be critical.

REFERENCES

Ahmed, Azam and Habib Zahori (2014), "For Afghan Journalists, Election Brings a Sense of National Duty", *New York Times*. Accessed August 12, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/12/world/asia/for-afghan-journalists-election-brings-a-sense-of-duty.html?_r=0.

BBC News. (2014). "Afghan Election: Taliban Removed Voters' Fingers". 15 June. Accessed August 8, 2014. http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-27857343.

Bijlert, Martine van. (2009). "How to Win an Afghan Election: Perceptions and Practices". *Afghanistan Analysts Network*. February. Accessed August 6, 2014.

http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/10/2009-AAN-MvB-Afghan-Election.pdf.

Bose, Srinjoy. (2014). "Afghanistan's 2014 Election: An Observer's Account". 22 April. http://thediplomat.com/2014/04/afghanistans-2014-election-an-observers-account/.

Carberry, Sean. (2014). "Taliban Attack on Election HQ Makes Good on Campaign Promise." *National Public Radio*. 29 March. Accessed August 8, 2014. http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2014/03/29/296229874/taliban-attack-election-headquarters-as-vote-nears.

Clark, Kate. (2014). "A Second Round Surge in Turnout in Loya Paktia?" *Afghanistan Analysts Network*. 20 June. Accessed August 10, 2014. https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/elections-2014-32-a-second-round-surge-in-turnout-in-loya-paktia/.

Coren, Anna, Laura Smith-Spark, Masoud Popalzai, and Qadir Sediqi. (2014). "Afghans Flock to Vote for New President Despite Threat of Taliban Violence". *CNN*. April 5. Accessed August 8, 2014. http://edition.cnn.com/2014/04/05/world/asia/afghanistan-elections/.

Donati, Jessica and Hamid Shalizi. 2014. "Kabul's Serene Hotel Attacked by Gunmen". *The Huffington Post*. 20 March. Accessed August 8, 2014. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/20/kabul-serena-hotel-attack_n_5001566.html.

Graham-Harrison, Emma. (2014). "Afghanistan's Government Split as Karzai Suspends Special Forces Chiefs". *The Guardian*. 22 May. Accessed August 6, 2014. http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/21/afghanistan-government-split-karzai-taliban-kabul.

Independent Election Commission. "Results by Votes". (2004). Accessed August 10, 2014. http://www.iec.org.af/public_html/Election%20Results%20Website/english/results_enwww/results_enwww_5.html.

Independent Election Commission. "Final Certified Presidential Results by Vote Order". (2009). Accessed August 10, 2014. http://www.iec.org.af/results_2009/leadingCandidate.html.

National Geographic Society. (2003). http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0311/feature2/images/mp_download.2.pdf.

Nordland, Rod and Habib Zahori. 2014. "Bomber Kills Six at Interior Ministry Entrance in Kabul". *The New York Times*. 2 April. Accessed August 8, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/03/world/asia/bomber-kills-six-at-interior-ministry-entrance-in-kabul.html.

Rosenberg, Matthew and Azam Ahmad. "Afghan Candidate Alleges Voting Fraud by Karzai and Aides". *New York Times*. 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/17/world/asia/abdullah-abdullah-campaign-in-afghanistan-alleges-widespread-election-fraud-and-points-at-karzai.html.

Ruttig, Thomas, and Pakteen Ibrahimi. (2014). "Election Mobilisation of Women in the Pashtun Southeast". *Afghanistan Analysts Network*. 12 June. Accessed August 6, 2014.

http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/a-tribal-pact-and-women-voters-election-mobilisation-in-the-pashtun-southeast/.

Stancati, Margherita, Yaroslav Trofimov, and Nathan Hodge. (2014). "Abdullah Abdullah Campaign Claims Inflated Turnout in Rival's Power Base". *The Wall Street Journal.* 16 June. Accessed August 10, 2014. http://online.wsj.com/articles/abdullah-abdullah-campaign-in-afghanistan-accuses-rival-of-ballot-stuffing-1402932540.

The Economist. "Stuffed Sheep". 2014. http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2014/07/afghanistans-election.

The Kabul Times. 2014. "16 Taliban Killed in Own Suicide bombing in Ghazni". 2 April. Accessed August 8, 2014. http://thekabultimes.wordpress.com/2014/04/02/16-taliban-killed-in-own-suicide-bombing-in-ghazni/.

TOLO News. "Role of Social Media in 2014 Presidential Elections". (2014). Accessed August 12, 2014. http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/16808-role-of-social-media-in-2014-presidential-elections.

Trofimov, Yaroslav, Margherita Stancati, and Nathan Hodge.(2014). "Afghans Turn Out to Vote despite Taliban Violence". *The Wall Street Journal.* 16 June. Accessed August 8, 2014. http://online.wsj.com/articles/afghans-turn-out-to-vote-despite-taliban-attacks-which-killed-68-people-1402833350.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Srinjoy Bose email: srinjoybose@gmail.com

Srinjoy Bose is Prime Minister's Endeavour Scholar and PhD research scholar at the Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy, Australian National University. His principal research and teaching interests include state-society relations, state building in post-conflict and weak states, post-conflict transition, war-termination, and ethics in IR, in particular concepts of Justice and Humanitarian Intervention. In 2014, Srinjoy monitored the Afghan Presidential and Provincial Council elections as an international elections observer. He will be returning to Afghanistan to observe the 2015 Parliamentary elections.