



CARNEGIE
ENDOWMENT FOR
INTERNATIONAL PEACE

Congressional Testimony

PROSPECTS FOR AFGHANISTAN'S 2014 ELECTIONS

Testimony by **Sarah Chayes**

Senior Associate, South Asia Program

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Senate Foreign Relations Committee

Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South and
Central Asian Affairs

May 21, 2013

Mr. Chairman, I would like to express my appreciation for your initiative in holding this hearing—and I think I can speak for the other panelists in doing so. If the same foresight had been shown in 2009, Afghanistan might be in a different condition today.

While I agree with the importance of an election Afghans can believe in, my experience leads me to be extremely skeptical that the U.S. government has the fortitude to take the vigorous actions that would be required to make it so. At the very least, any such effort must commence with a deconflation of U.S. government activities. When one part of the U.S. government is paying large amounts of cash to senior Afghan political figures—including but not limited to the president himself—then U.S. efforts to promote political integrity are fatally undermined.

I was asked to comment on the last Afghan presidential election, in 2009. A word about my perspective. At the time I was special advisor to the command of ISAF; I had lived in Afghanistan for seven years, almost all of them in an ordinary house in downtown Kandahar, working, and communicating in Pashtu, with ordinary local residents, men and women. This immersion offered me an intimate insight into the events. I analyzed them in detail for the ISAF command.

The campaign to fix the 2009 election was highly sophisticated. It rested first on a psychological operations campaign—aimed at us, the international community. The first element was Afghan government officials’ insistence to their civilian and military counterparts on the need to “Afghanize” the electoral process. The critical importance of respecting Afghan sovereignty was repeatedly emphasized, along with Afghans’ legendary dislike for international interference. The discourse played on our own sensitivities about our involvement in Afghanistan, our desire not to appear colonialist, and it fit with our own narrative that we were turning Afghanistan back over to Afghans. Such a framing resonates even better with today’s transition narrative.

UNAMA was very invested in “Afghanizing” the electoral process; the U.S. embassy resisted any efforts to conceive of intrusive oversight procedures; and ISAF was delighted to stay removed from political doings, its troops relegated to “third tier” security, beyond the two inner rings manned by the Afghan police and army respectively.

The result was a voting process that was protected from international observation.

In fact, GIRoA was not neutral. It had been structured over the preceding year or more as a re-elect Karzai machine, including by strategic appointments of and payments to operatives, who were under explicit instructions to use the powers and privileges of their offices to this end. The key ministries of defense and interior, the directorates of national security and local governance were deployed in this effort, as were the governors of Kandahar, Zabul, Ghazni, and Nuristan Provinces among others. In this context, ordinary Afghans saw the international community as the sole potential guarantors of the independence of the process. They wanted more interference, not less. I will never forget the call I received the evening before the election, from Spin Boldak, a town on the border with Pakistan. My contact was beside himself, describing the ballot-box stuffing that had already begun, in so-and-so’s house, on thus-and-such a street. His clear expectation was that ISAF would send officers to break up the violation on the spot.

The second main element of the psy-ops campaign was the successful effort to reduce the number of “black districts”—that is, districts that were judged too dangerous to allow for voting. The insinuation was communicated to international officials that Karzai planned to contest the election, because most of these districts were in Pashtun areas, presumed on ethnic grounds to be favorable to

his re-election. The fact that Pashtuns, no less than other Afghans, were largely exasperated by the abusive and corrupt behavior of the Afghan government was lost on most international officials.

Under GIRoA pressure, ISAF agreed to conduct “election operations”—that is, clearing operations in areas international forces had no intention of holding, something General McChrystal had instructed his officers he would not do. Of more concern, a senior Afghan official explained to the top officers at ISAF, the U.S. Embassy and UNAMA, at a joint meeting at ISAF HQ, that he had been ordered to make election deals with Taliban commanders in dozens of districts. Later follow up with him and U.S. intelligence officials determined that in return for allowing electoral materials to enter and exit their districts on election day, Taliban commanders received sanctuary (assurances that either the ANA, the ANP, or both, depending on the district, would not enter), prisoner releases, and money, in different combinations. It would be no surprise if some of the cash provided to Karzai was used for these purposes.

The Taliban were not asked to allow people actually to vote, and based on a spot check of about half a dozen districts in three southern provinces, they did not. In each case, residents and polling place officials reported a handful of voters at most. Why wasn't Karzai upset at the actual disenfranchisement of “his” voters by the Taliban? Because he was not in need of real votes. He was in need of empty ballot boxes from authorized polling stations. Those were the boxes, in large part, that were stuffed.

The oversight bodies in 2009 were weak and under-resourced. Still, the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) produced rigorous empirical evidence of what the then ECC head, experienced elections monitor Grant Kippen, recently called the most widespread, pervasive, and egregious campaign of fraud he has witnessed. At the time, he kept me abreast of Karzai efforts to intimidate and suborn one of the Afghan ECC members.

Such were the conditions at the period of the most intensive U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, when a State Department official of ambassadorial rank was sent to Kabul to oversee election activities, and the election was at the center of UNAMA's focus. The upshot was a deeply disappointed Afghan population, a sense of betrayal at the hands of an international community Afghans had depended on to referee the exercise.

Today, the narrative prevails that the U.S. was too anti-Karzai in 2009, exactly the opposite of what most Afghans experienced, and what cash payments to Karzai, rain and shine, indicate. As of today, Karzai has vetoed a bill establishing the structure and mandate of the Independent Election Commission (IEC) and the ECC. He is demanding the right to unilaterally appoint all IEC members, and wants the Attorney General's Office to play the role of the ECC. I know from intensive experience with anti-corruption efforts that Attorney General Aloko takes telephone orders from Karzai.

So the question arises: will the international community have the constancy and the deftness to outmaneuver whatever Karzai and his network have in store this time? Is it right to “message” that the United States takes the election seriously and then not take commensurate action? What if Karzai's model for an IEC and ECC under his orders prevails? How will the international community act to ensure that the results of this “Afghan managed and Afghan led” election aren't in fact dictated by the Karzai network?

It is my view that U.S. officials should consider the option of dissociating the United States from the exercise—including its financing—if clear steps paving the way for direct Karzai control of its

outcome are taken in the lead-up to the vote. Direct appointment of organizing and oversight bodies is an obvious such step. Other robust international approaches would include linking continued development and even security assistance to the Afghan government to a credible electoral process.

At the very least, the United States Government must reach a consensus about what its objectives are in Afghanistan. Either the President or Congress must arbitrate the conflicting agendas. If the United States is serious about a credible election and minimal political integrity, then USG actors whose direct relationships with key Afghan political figures, including financial support, contradict that objective must be ordered to desist from such actions.

Secondly, serious scenario-planning and risk-mitigation strategies “war-gaming” the robust courses of action suggested above—as startling as they may sound—are needed, and immediately. An only slightly modified version of the 2009 approach will not produce a better outcome. Finally, lessons learned from this Afghan example should be applied to U.S. policies toward other emerging democracies, including in the Arab world.

I would like to conclude my testimony with two further recommendations, one tactical and one strategic.

ISAF forces and the ANSF should be explicitly tasked with protecting Afghan voters impartially—not just from Taliban violence, but also from violence and intimidation emanating from GIRoA or opposition forces.

And more broadly, the only way to significantly reduce the incentive for cheating in the 2014 election is to work seriously to build political consensus among Afghan constituencies ahead of time. The current U.S. policy of pursuing negotiations exclusively with the Taliban is self-defeating. Given the non-representation of significant Afghan stakeholders, the likely outcome—if such efforts were to produce any results at all—is an agreement that would be unacceptable to much of the Afghan population, thus planting the seeds of future civil conflict.

A better approach both to reconciliation and to the upcoming election would be to broaden the scope of ongoing reconciliation efforts to all major Afghan constituencies. GIRoA should have a seat at the table, but not the gavel, and Pakistan should not play any role. Pakistan’s concerns and aspirations with respect to Afghanistan should be settled through formal inter-state channels, not via proxy involvement in an intra-Afghan peace process.

Again, Mr. Chairman, I would like to applaud your initiative in calling this hearing, and to thank you for this opportunity to share my analysis with you.