

# Afghanistan's Parliamentary Elections

By Sonali Kolhatkar and Jim Ingalls | September 16, 2005

The United States has supposedly created new “democracies” in Afghanistan and Iraq, but these endeavors give democracy a bad name. Sure, the two countries have some ingredients of representative democracy, such as elected officials and a constitution. But both countries are still beset by grinding poverty, insurgencies, and entrenched militia forces that make the exercise of democracy either impractical or dangerous. Both countries have high numbers of foreign troops occupying their land and terrorizing the population while hunting “terrorists.” And both countries’ governments answer to their respective U.S. ambassador on most issues. In the midst of such a violent and coercive environment, Afghans are pressing ahead with the latest in a series of “democratic” exercises imposed by the United States: the first Afghan parliamentary elections in four decades will take place this Sunday, September 18. Even though many Afghans hope that the elections will empower them to end their troubles, the fear is that the elections will probably be as undemocratic in practice as every other U.S.-inflicted Afghan institution.

### Entrenching Warlord Rule?

Warlords, most of whom have past or present U.S. backing, still rule much of the countryside and will play a big role in the elections. A survey by the Human Rights Research and Advocacy Consortium (HRRAC) found that a majority of Afghans are fearful that the elections will be used by the “commanders,” to cement their power. One respondent said, “The only concern that we have is commanders’ misuse of their power.”<sup>1</sup> According to election rules, any individuals commanding private armies are to be disqualified. In July, the Electoral Complaints Commission (EEC) drew up a list of 208 “blacklisted” candidates who had ties to illegal armed groups. As of this week, only 45 lower profile candidates have actually been disqualified from running. Meanwhile, warlords like Abdul Rasoul Sayyaf, whose criminal past has been documented by groups like Human Rights Watch, are openly running for seats in the Parliament. So are former Taliban officials, like the ex-deputy interior minister Mullah Khaksar.

U.S.-backed president Hamid Karzai has defended the right of warlords to run for parliament, in the

interests of “national reconciliation.” This is just the latest in a series of concessions that Karzai has made to warlords. Last October, he ran for president on an ostensibly anti-warlord platform, saying, “Private militias are the country’s greatest danger.” To back up his rhetoric, Karzai sacked two warlords in his cabinet and pretended to fire Ismail Khan by removing him from the post of governor of Herat. After he won the elections, Karzai appointed Khan Minister of Energy, and brought in the feared warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum, former Defense Minister and presidential candidate, as Afghanistan’s Army Chief of Staff. U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad (now ambassador to Iraq) endorsed Karzai’s decision, commenting in March that the “decision to give a role to ... regional strongmen is a wise policy.” In addition, Karzai’s government has promised former Taliban fighters immunity from prosecution for war crimes. Under this program, initiated with the approval of the United States, even Mullah Omar, the notorious Taliban chief, would be granted immunity if he recants his ways.<sup>2</sup>

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## Widespread Violence

Besides the repression of entrenched warlords, violence carried out by “remnants” of the Taliban, al-Qaida, or other Afghan formations, as well as U.S. soldiers, is making it harder for Afghans to exercise their democratic rights. More than 1,000 people, including civilians, have been killed in Afghanistan this year alone. It has been the bloodiest year for the U.S. military, with 65 soldiers killed since January 2005. In addition to the U.S. and international troops, anti-government groups have targeted moderate Islamic clerics, government officials, foreign aid workers, and people involved with the upcoming elections. Citizens have been killed for carrying voter registration cards, electoral workers have been attacked, and candidates, particularly women, have received death threats. A total of 6 candidates and 4 election workers have been killed.

Although much of the violence is an attempt to disrupt elections, the U.S. military attributes this year’s dramatic increase in fatalities partly to its own violent provocation. According to the magazine *Stars and Stripes*, “the recent surge in fighting could be attributed more to American aggressiveness than anything al-Qaida is doing.” U.S. troops have conducted “a series of operations in areas where U.S. presence has been minimal or nonexistent” to try to provoke attacks on themselves and thereby catch “terrorists” in the act. “I think we’re initiating the overwhelming majority of the actions,” said Brigadier-General James Champion. The attackers “would not be firing the first shots if we weren’t in the area.”<sup>3</sup>

The U.S. troop presence is something a truly democratic Afghanistan would surely eliminate or curtail. In July, over 1,000 demonstrators outside the main U.S. base at Bagram called for an end to arbitrary house break-ins and arrests and for treating Afghans

with more dignity. This was the largest protest since a wave of anti-U.S. demonstrations across the country in May led to 16 deaths. During his May 2005 visit to the United States, President Karzai requested more Afghan control over U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan, the handing over of Afghan prisoners, and the end of home searches without government permission, all of which were rejected. U.S. president George W. Bush told Karzai, “Of course, our troops will respond to U.S. commanders.”

A recent report by the Kabul-based Afghanistan Justice Project cited “grave abuses” by U.S. troops, “many of them of the same sort used by their counterparts in the communist, mujahidin, and Taliban regimes that preceded them.” These include “crude and brutal” methods of torture that have sometimes led to death and the use of secret detention facilities that facilitate torture; and unacknowledged detentions that are tantamount to “disappearances.”

Particularly relevant to the parliamentary elections, the report concludes that “U.S. forces have jeopardized prospects for establishing stable and accountable institutions in Afghanistan, have undermined the security of the Afghan people ... and have reinforced a pattern of impunity that undermines the legitimacy of the political process.”<sup>4</sup>

## What Will Change?

Given current conditions, many analysts are suggesting that the September 18 elections will probably result in very little change. There will be 5,800 candidates running for 249 seats in the Wolesi Jirga (House of the People), and 34 representatives on provincial councils. Rules set up by Karzai, with the approval of the United States, allow political parties, but disallow the party affiliations of candidates to be printed on electoral ballots. In other words, 5,800 candidates are running as independents. Joanna

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Nathan of the International Crisis Group predicts that the assembly will be a “weak and fractured, possibly even paralyzed body.” Barnett Rubin of New York University says that the elections won’t make much of a difference because, “Until Afghanistan has a functioning, legal economy and basic institutions, there’s nothing really for a parliament to do except act as a kind of puppet platform for people’s views.”

Even so, about half the Afghan population has registered to vote and expects important changes to come from these elections. The elections have the potential to be the most democratic events in Afghanistan since the budding of women’s, student, and leftist organizations in the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, there is a slim possibility of the civilian, non-fundamentalist majority in Afghanistan gaining a measure of political power. Women have 68 seats reserved for them as per the new constitution, guaranteeing at least some non-patriarchal views in the assembly.<sup>5</sup>

In a recent trip to Afghanistan we interviewed Noorani, the editor of a weekly Kabul-based newspaper, *Rozgharan*, who described three groups that will be represented in the parliamentary elections: “Firstly, Karzai and his technocrats, another group belonging to Qanooni, Dostum, and Mohaqiq, [warlords] and the third: a group of intellectuals, who are unhappy with the failure of Karzai and the warlords.” He complained that the third group had no support from the world community. In addition, they have little economic power and are under threat from the warlords.

Among this third group, there are numerous parties organizing against fundamentalism and for social justice and democracy. The Solidarity Party of Afghanistan, for example, criticizes both Karzai and the warlords. We met with one of the party representatives, Wasay Engineer, who told us that his party has members in 25 of Afghanistan’s 35 provinces.

The party’s platform is based on “women’s rights, democracy, and secular society, a disarming of the country, and freedom of the press.” Between 30 and 40% of its members are women. The Solidarity Party is putting up about 30 candidates for the Parliamentary elections “to show that there are some in Afghanistan who still work for the people.” Engineer says that the Solidarity Party is not alone—they are part of a forum of 16 anti-fundamentalist parties throughout the country.

We also met independent candidates. Malalai Joya and Qasimi represented the province of Farah at the Constitutional Loya Jirga in December 2003. Both

live under threat to their lives because of their outspoken criticism of the warlords. Qasimi did not allow us to photograph him and uses a pseudonym to protect himself. He says he has been threatened many times by the government, police, and security forces.

Malalai Joya became famous overnight when she caused an uproar at the

Constitutional Loya Jirga by denouncing fiercely the warlords who were present, saying they “turned our country into the nucleus of national and international wars ... [They are] the most anti-women people in the society who brought our country to this state.” She told the assembly, “They should be taken to national and international court.” (*Los Angeles Times*, December 23, 2003) Now Joya wears a burqa to disguise herself when she travels and has six full time security guards. Her house and office were attacked by armed men after her speech at the Constitutional meeting. But she has no intention of disappearing from public life, believing her activism will inspire others. In her office she posed for a photo in front of a poster with the following words: “If I arise, then you will arise, we will all arise.”

Washington likes to highlight its contributions to Afghanistan’s progress toward “democracy,” but U.S.

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actions in the name of democracy undermine real democracy-building. After having hopes of a fundamentalist-free government crushed many times over by Karzai, many ordinary Afghans consider the parliamentary elections their last chance to exercise some power over their lives. But many activists realize that their fight for justice will not end with elections. Malalai Joya promised us, “Whether I will be a member of parliament or not, I will continue my struggle while my enemies, meaning the enemies of the country, are alive and are working against the women and men of Afghanistan.”

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*Sonali Kolhatkar and Jim Ingalls are co-directors of the Afghan Women’s Mission, a U.S.-based non-profit that works in solidarity with the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA). They visited Afghanistan in February 2005.*

## END NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> “Afghan Voters Worry ‘Guns and Money’ Will Affect Election,” *Noticias.info*, September 13, 2005.
- <sup>2</sup> Paul McGeough, “Old Ways Linger Beneath a Veil of Votes,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, Australia, September 10, 2005.
- <sup>3</sup> Kent Harris, “Vicenza-based Troops in Afghanistan Aggressively Taking Fight to the Enemy,” *Stars and Stripes*, June 28, 2005.
- <sup>4</sup> The Afghanistan Justice Project, *Casting Shadows: War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity, 1978-2001*, July 2005.
- <sup>5</sup> “Facts and figures about Afghanistan’s elections,” *Reuters*, September 12, 2005.

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Editor: John Gershman, IRC  
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