



Democratisation and Elections

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Introduction

Democracy must be framed in Afghan terms if it is to take root in Afghanistan. It must reaffirm, rather than threaten, Afghans' identity as citizens of a sovereign, Islamic nation. Furthermore, the process of democratisation needs to be encouraged as part of a substantive, long-term commitment to political and administrative institution-building by the Afghan government and donor community.

Ongoing AREU research on representative governance is exploring perceptions of democracy among Afghans in six provinces. Initial findings demonstrate the highly contentious nature of both the word "democracy" and the values it is seen to encompass. There is a widespread concern among respondents that democracy has brought with it Western, secular values that remain for the most part alien to Afghanistan's Islamic identity. "Democracy" is widely seen as an imported system—as another foreign intervention in the political and social affairs of the country.

Democracy has also been discredited in the eyes of Afghans as a result of unmet (although sometimes unrealistic) expectations. The economic development and security anticipated by many in the post-2001 era have not materialised. Trust in government structures has also declined, with fraudulent elections in 2009 contributing to the decreasing credibility of the very institutions designed to implement democratic processes. Donors and policymakers have prioritised a short-term focus on elections, without committing to the long-term institution building necessary to ensure lasting, democratic stability.

Despite these factors, however, AREU research has found that the *prospect* of public participation in the choosing of leaders through elections is still fundamentally accepted and welcomed by many. Concerns lie not with the idea of political participation, but with the need to ensure: a commitment to the upholding of Islamic values, a level playing field on which participation can take place, a secure environment, and tangible government service provision as a result.

This policy note summarises key findings of AREU's representative governance research and presents recommendations around the following three themes:

- 1) **The concept of "democracy":** Elections and the principles of representative governance are widely welcomed and aspired toward in Afghanistan, but the word "democracy" often carries negative connotations. It cannot be assumed to be acceptable or desirable to Afghans at face value.
- 2) **Loss of faith in democracy:** High expectations remain unmet, and the subsequent loss of faith is compounded by a lack of trust in political institutions and the perception that electoral outcomes are predetermined by international players.
- 3) **Elections 2009, 2010 and beyond:** Despite these challenges, September's parliamentary elections are already invoking interest and preparation from constituents and candidates alike. While far from perfect, the electoral cycle in Afghanistan has begun to provide some sense of political stability and should be maintained. Nevertheless, significant electoral reforms are necessary.

About the Author

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The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit's mission is to inform and influence policy and practice through conducting high-quality, policy-relevant research and actively disseminating the results, and to promote a culture of research and learning.

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1. The Concept of “Democracy”

“Democracy” is a value-laden concept in Afghanistan, carrying a number of negative connotations. It is widely associated with “freedom,” such as to participate in elections, but also with “excessive” freedom, which could be used to disregard cultural and religious norms and values. Urban respondents in particular discussed the concern that young people or those living in rural areas, who perhaps did not know better, were “misusing” the freedom brought by democracy to justify socially unacceptable behaviour. The word “democracy” is also often used to signify that “anything goes,” for example regarding the unregulated and chaotic driving seen in Kabul, the extortionate prices charged for goods, or women walking in public without a headscarf. “What can be done? This is a democracy.” There is a widely held opinion among respondents that there should be some form of national control of the individual freedom that democracy might mean to certain groups of people.

Related to the desire for social control is the way in which “democracy” is widely interpreted in Afghanistan as liberal or “Western” democracy, complete with its emphasis on liberal values, such as the separation of religion and state, a market economy and gender equality (as opposed to women’s rights¹). This is directly compared with “Islamic democracy,” in which a democratic political system was set within the “framework of Islam.” While differing from respondent to respondent, the set of values identified as within an Islamic framework were described in such a way as to denote a lifestyle with which people identified, as opposed to a lifestyle or value-set outside the framework with which they did not.

It is the emphasis on liberal values, and not the prospect of democracy as a political system, that was considered most problematic to the majority of respondents interviewed for the study. Respondents tended to maintain that with social restrictions in place and within an “Islamic framework,” democracy was desirable in Afghanistan.

¹ A number of respondents emphasised the way in which women’s rights are incorporated into Islam, but the implication was often that these rights were often different to those available to men. This then can be distinguished from a liberal emphasis on gender equality, in which the same rights are pursued for both sexes. This issue will be discussed further in forthcoming AREU papers on Afghan perspectives of democracy and democratisation.

Recommendations:

- The international community should acknowledge the contextual connotations of “democracy,” which in Afghanistan is all too often assumed by the international community to be unquestionably positive, with little consideration as to what the term may imply in the Afghan context and how it is received and interpreted by Afghans. The 2010 Kabul Conference provides an important opportunity for donors to revisit the term “democracy,” acknowledge its complex connotations in Afghanistan and look toward “Afghanising” and encouraging Government of Afghanistan (GoA) ownership of the democratisation process as far as possible. The international community should consider replacing the use of the word “democracy” with “representative government,” as a step in this direction. The Kabul Conference also provides the chance to debate the critical issue of what kind of international assistance might be appropriate and acceptable to encourage the strengthening of representative government in Afghanistan.
- The GoA should define democracy on Afghan terms: The prospect of undertaking this task is daunting, given the range of opinions and perspectives among Afghans themselves. But starting a debate—perhaps in parliament, and televised—about democratic values and their meaning in the Afghan context could be constructive in generating acceptance of democracy in general. Before this, at the Kabul Conference, the GoA needs to endorse the democratic system, but publicly encourage debate as to what this might constitute in the Afghan context. Evidently, this kind of discussion could produce outcomes that do not sit comfortably with liberal/Western democratic principles, but it is important that democracy be defined on Afghan terms in order to counter the widespread sentiment that it is an imported, and thus expendable, political system.

2. Unmet Expectations, Discredited Institutions

The standards set by respondents in interviews for judging the quality of Afghan democracy were often based on key characteristics of established democratic countries—for example, high levels of economic development, rule of law and checks and balances against corrupt practices. This is an understandable correlation, but demonstrates extremely high expectations of what a democratic system should

provide. Often discussed in interviews was the implausibility of having a functioning democracy without these characteristics and how widespread poverty and insecurity are compromising the value of political representation.² In this way, hallmarks of established democracies become similar to the liberal values discussed above—they become integral parts of what “democracy” means, and thus if a country does not live up to these standards it becomes a “non-democracy,” or the democratic system itself is blamed. If democracy as implemented by the Afghan government does not present an attractive or viable alternative to the parallel governance structures proposed (and implemented) by anti-government actors, support for insurgent groups may continue to increase.

A key problem for the Afghan government in this regard lies in convincing the public that its political institutions are trustworthy and credible. The 2009 elections brought into question the impartiality and capacity of the Independent Election Commission (IEC), with significant discrepancies between vote counts occurring at polling stations, provincial centres and in the final tally. Provincial council results still remain disputed in a number of provinces.³ This is partly the result of a lack of GoA and donor support to the IEC and other political institutions (such as parties) in the interim period between elections. But it is also the responsibility of the IEC to ensure that their own activities are considered legitimate in the eyes of Afghans. If the transparency and reliability of key democratic processes remain questionable, it will be increasingly difficult to encourage participation and local buy-in.

Finally, the credibility of these institutions is undermined by undue international intervention in

² This concern echoes the globally debated issue of whether democratic politics bring about economic growth and/or poverty reduction, or whether growth and/or poverty reduction are preconditions for democratisation. See, for example, Adrian Leftwich, Evelyn Huber, Mustaq Khan, Jean Grugel and B He, “Debate: Democracy and Development” in *New Political Economy* 7, no. 2 (2002): 269-281; evidently other factors also prove preconditions for democratic governance—such as basic security, rule of law and literacy. Nevertheless, economic growth that transcends social divides is considered by many as a significant indicator of democracy’s chances of taking hold—see Frances Stewart and Meghan O’Sullivan, “Democracy, Conflict and Development — Three Cases” (Oxford: Queen Elizabeth House, 1998), <http://www3.qeh.ox.ac.uk/RePEc/qeh/qehwps/qehwps15.pdf>, accessed 14 August 2008.

³ This was demonstrated, for example, in January 2010, when dissatisfied provincial council candidates and constituents lobbied IEC officials in the National Assembly building (research observations, 2010).

the political process. In interviews, many respondents talked about the interference of “outside” actors—neighbouring countries or donor governments—and the way in which this affected the value of their vote. This was particularly the case following the planned (and then cancelled) run-off for the presidential election. If anything, intervention compromises the legitimacy of democratic processes and consolidates fears that Afghans themselves have little part to play in determining the outcomes of their own elections.

Recommendations:

- **Economic development at the local level is crucial.** There will be little incentive to support the GoA if Afghanistan’s economic development does not result in positive effects at the local level or benefit the majority of citizens. Widespread poverty compromises representation in elections and limits the extent to which people have time or taste for political participation. More focus must be placed by the donor community and GoA on ensuring that local economies can thrive across all provinces of Afghanistan, and not merely in those that are considered donor priorities. This would serve to counter the perception that aid is unequally distributed, with insecure provinces “rewarded.” A long-term commitment to providing and maintaining security in all regions is necessary.
- **Long-term institution building must be a priority for the GoA and donor community.** Elections by themselves do not comprise democratisation. A long-term commitment to the building of political and administrative institutions *between* elections is vital, and should be made at the Kabul Conference. Elections will continue to be subject to fraud and public dispute if more is not done to increase the capacity and public credibility of national political and administrative institutions.
- **The IEC must take responsibility for restoring its own credibility.** The credibility of the IEC will not be restored unless it takes substantive measures to improve its own accountability to the Afghan people. These measures should comprise more than the token expunging of contract workers—incidences of fraud taking place at the hands of permanent IEC staff at the centre must also be addressed immediately, along with issues of how its leadership is selected.
- **The donor community must refrain from undue interference in the political process.** The perception that election results in 2009 were predetermined by international actors is widespread. This had the effect of undermining

the perceived value of voting in the eyes of many Afghans.⁴ It is naïve to propose that donor governments have no political involvement in Afghanistan's domestic affairs, but the donor community must refrain from undue intervention that might compromise the political process.

3. Elections in 2009, 2010 and Beyond

AREU research into voting patterns at the local level in relatively secure provinces found considerable enthusiasm for the 2009 polls, despite unmet expectations of democracy, the mistrust of institutions and the negative press generated by the 2009 elections. Reasons for public participation in both presidential and provincial council elections were highly localised. These included the need to demonstrate the strength and size of a given community, the desire to secure a government representative who was familiar enough to be held accountable for delivering services, and the use of the national and provincial electoral arenas for the playing out of local politics. Overall, there was a general expectation among respondents at the time that participating in elections could bring about positive change.

Furthermore, findings from initial research into constituent perspectives of parliamentary functions and dynamics are indicating that there is a considerable amount of anticipation among Afghans for the upcoming parliamentary elections, and that, even seven months ahead, preparations are being made in communities, for example in the drawing up of potential candidate lists. MPs themselves are mobilising voter support networks in their constituencies, and appear more willing than ever before to categorise themselves into one of three groups: pro-government, opposition, or independent (*betaraf*). These early findings demonstrate the ways in which elections are still seen as an appropriate and legitimate means of transferring power in Afghanistan, despite widespread fraud and insecurity.

Recommendations:

- **Parliamentary elections should take place and the electoral calendar be maintained.** All actors should be aware that while far from perfect, the electoral cycle in Afghanistan is providing a sense of stability in the political system—a stability that in previous political regimes has not lasted more than a decade. If this era of democratic

governance is to last, it is vital that a framework of elections is maintained, providing a backbone against which democratisation can take place. In the medium term, the current electoral calendar will need revisions due to the number of elections required in the Constitution and the inability of the GoA to fund them autonomously. But at present it provides essential and widely-accepted benchmarks which must be maintained.

- **Electoral reforms:** Recent electoral law reform illustrates the difficulties of creating transparency when vested political interests do not benefit from such transparency. Although changes in the IEC are undoubtedly needed, it seems unlikely that the necessary reforms will take place prior to parliamentary elections. Nevertheless, the following three observations taken from AREU research should be considered:

- 1) Many Afghans, despite criticising international intervention in domestic affairs, still favour and trust international elections observer missions. The strong presence of these missions could help to counter fraud at polling stations, should security circumstances allow them to be operational.
- 2) Linked to this, donor community-provided technical support at polling stations and counting centres might, at this stage, be the best way to encourage transparency in a relatively apolitical and inexpensive manner that would also be acceptable and perceived as legitimate activity for international actors.
- 3) Insecurity aids fraudulent practices, and thus the continued commitment to ensuring security in the run up to, during and after elections is paramount.

This policy note has briefly highlighted some of the key issues raised by respondents in AREU's ongoing study on representative governance and has given eight recommendations or points for consideration to move forward in strengthening the democratisation process. The Kabul Conference provides a prime opportunity to consider some of these recommendations in depth and incorporate them into policy. This is particularly crucial in the context of the planned 2010 parliamentary elections.

⁴ Noah Coburn, *Losing Legitimacy? Some Afghan Views on the Government, the International Community, and the 2009 Elections* (Kabul: AREU, 2009).