



## Afghanistan's Presidential Election

By Ahmad Majidyar

*Afghanistan will be a pressing item on the Obama administration's foreign policy agenda. Insurgent activity is at its worst since the U.S.-led invasion in 2001,<sup>1</sup> and the country risks spiraling into instability. President Hamid Karzai's government is losing popularity and appears unable to contain the growing crisis. Against this backdrop, the Obama administration may be tempted to support postponing the presidential election. This would be a mistake. Holding elections is crucial to boosting Afghanistan's confidence and cementing the country's fragile democratic transformation.*

Hamid Karzai has been a solid partner for Washington, but in the past two years his rule has faltered. The Afghan government presently controls only 30 percent of the country's territory,<sup>2</sup> and humanitarian organizations deem almost half of the country too dangerous for aid workers.<sup>3</sup> Two thousand eight was the deadliest year for coalition troops since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. More than 1,445 civilians lost their lives in the first eight months due to Taliban action, coalition crossfire, and terrorist bombings.<sup>4</sup> For Afghanistan's leader to acquire the popular legitimacy necessary to lead the multiethnic country effectively, holding a timely presidential election will be essential.

In October 2004, Karzai was elected to a five-year term in the first direct vote for the presidency in Afghanistan's history. This year's election will demonstrate the Afghans' desire to reject the extremists opposing the current democratic process in the country. If an election does not occur by April 22, 2009, Afghanistan's constitution states that a *loya jirga* (grand assembly) must be convened. This would wreak havoc on Afghanistan's already fragile political and social fabric. The government would lose legitimacy and risk an ensuing constitutional crisis. For the Afghan elections to succeed, it is imperative that the Obama administration engage the issue immediately.

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### Preparing for Elections

Once an election date is set, security will be the next order of business. According to the United Nations (UN) special representative for Afghanistan, Kai Eide, security in Afghanistan is at its worst since the fall of the Taliban.<sup>5</sup> Once confined to the south—provinces such as Helmand and Kandahar—the insurgency has now reached more peaceful regions in central and western Afghanistan, including the provinces of Farah, Badghis, Logar, and Wardak. The Taliban has gained control of districts in Kabul's neighboring provinces, threatening the capital's population. Four out of seven districts of Logar province are reportedly under Taliban control.<sup>6</sup> There has also been a rise in suicide bombings, rocket attacks, and political assassinations.

Karzai himself has already escaped four assassination attempts, most recently at an April 28, 2008, independence day ceremony in Kabul.<sup>7</sup> On July 7, 2008, a suicide bombing at the Indian Embassy in Kabul killed 41 people and injured more than 140.<sup>8</sup> An emboldened Taliban killed three aid workers in Logar, less than sixty miles south of Kabul, in August 2008.<sup>9</sup> The following month, the Taliban assassinated Logar governor Abdullah Wardak.<sup>10</sup> And on November 14, 2008, Taliban gunmen killed Maulvi Shamsuddin, head of a religious council in the western province of Farah, bordering Iran, in response to his preaching against suicide attacks and violence.<sup>11</sup>

Despite deteriorating security, the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) launched the first of four phases of voter registration on October 6, 2008, registering 1 million eligible voters in fourteen provinces in north, north-east, and central Afghanistan. A month later, they began a second phase of registration in ten provinces, mainly in the north.<sup>12</sup> The third and fourth registration phases being launched in the more volatile eastern and southern provinces should finish before the end of February 2009.

Engaging the Taliban, which has rebuffed IEC efforts to enable its participation in elections, will not prevent violence. Fugitive Taliban leader Mullah Omar called on Afghans on the eve of the December Muslim Eid holiday to boycott the elections and promised renewed insurgency if foreign troops did not leave. "Do not allow yourselves to be deceived by this dishonest election announcement. In reality, the choice will be made in Washington."<sup>13</sup> The IEC's head in Logar province said on October 14 that registration rates in the province decreased by 30 percent after the Taliban distributed letters in villages warning people not to take part in the process.<sup>14</sup> On October 20, the Taliban destroyed a voter registration center in Ghazni<sup>15</sup> and murdered an election officer on November 9.<sup>16</sup> Intimidation is not the sole bailiwick of the Taliban. Local commanders are also culpable. On November 7, armed forces loyal to Hezb-e Islami's fugitive leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar kidnapped two election workers in Wardak,<sup>17</sup> a volatile province bordering Kabul.

U.S. officials have described Afghanistan's voter registration process as peaceful and successful.<sup>18</sup> Any such optimism is premature, especially because the process has just begun in areas in which insurgency is at its hottest. Unlike previous elections, the Afghan National Police are expected to be leading security arrangements. But a report by Grant Kippen, the former head of Afghanistan's Electoral Complaints Commission, warns that the inability of the police to travel in certain parts of southern Afghanistan could disenfranchise large numbers of Pashtuns.<sup>19</sup>

Ronald Neumann, U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan from 2005 to 2007, said in a November 12, 2008, interview, "Despite all security hazards, the elections could be implemented smoothly within the current security situation if adequate preparations are undertaken based on a thorough assessment of setting priorities and identifying the gaps,"<sup>20</sup> a general way of saying that a bit of insecurity will not be enough to deter elections. Indeed, the fact that two sets of elections in Afghanistan—the presidential one in 2004 and parliamentary elections in 2005—were held successfully amid widespread violence supports Neumann's assertion.

What preparations would therefore be needed? Defense Secretary Robert Gates's November 21, 2008, announcement to add an additional twenty thousand U.S. forces should help. Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said on December 20, 2008, that the number could rise to thirty thousand troops.<sup>21</sup> Some 3,500 to 4,000 troops from Fort Drum in New York have already begun deploying. On an unannounced trip to Afghanistan on December 11, Gates said he hoped to deploy two more combat brigades in Afghanistan by the spring.<sup>22</sup>

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NATO countries should also contribute to this surge in manpower, at least provisionally through the end of the election. But European allies have shown little interest in increasing troop levels so far. After meeting with General David Petraeus, Italian defense minister Ignazio La Russa said on December 10 that Italy would temporarily increase its number of troops in Afghanistan by five hundred for six months next year,<sup>23</sup> but his earlier remarks indicate that the additional forces will be military trainers for the Afghan security forces, not combat troops.<sup>24</sup> News sources indicate that the British troop withdrawal from Iraq will allow that nation to send between two thousand and five thousand additional troops to Afghanistan.<sup>25</sup> But the British timetable for withdrawal from Iraq is between March and June,<sup>26</sup> and redeployment may take additional time. Germany has refused to deploy to restive regions in the east and south. Chancellor Angela Merkel may also not risk losing public support by sending additional troops to a combat zone ahead of the German elections slated for September 2009.

Pakistan's cooperation will also be vital for election security. The Pakistani government boosted its troop levels and intensified patrols along the borders to prevent cross-border infiltration of insurgents in the run-up to the September 2005 parliamentary elections in Afghanistan.<sup>27</sup> Afghan militia groups have also played an active part in providing security in previous contests. But with many militia groups joining the insurgents, it is unwise to involve them in security arrangements.

## Making Votes Count

Enabling Afghans to cast ballots will be difficult. Making those ballots count may be as much of a challenge. Fraud

and irregularities have marred Afghanistan's previous elections. In the 2004 presidential vote, all candidates but Karzai alleged voter fraud and threatened to discount the results.<sup>28</sup> The IEC is under increasing criticism over questions of its independence and impartiality. Mohammad Daud Soltanzoi, a member of parliament from Ghazni province, has accused the IEC of trying to cheat in favor of Karzai,<sup>29</sup> who appointed all nine members of the commission, including the chairperson and deputy chairperson, on January 19, 2005.<sup>30</sup> In previous elections, involving international organizations and monitors may have mitigated problems with the IEC, but the commission has since assumed lead authority over elections. Kippen's report also points out that some of the IEC chairman's statements suggest that the commission is not impartial.<sup>31</sup>

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Holding the 2009 presidential election on time or with only minimal delay as provided by the constitution is essential for Afghanistan's political transformation to democracy and stability.

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Insufficient funding has also hindered preparations. The past two elections cost a total of \$359 million.<sup>32</sup> The IEC, however, has been unable to secure the \$102 million pledged by donors for the current four-phase voter registration process.<sup>33</sup> In contrast to previous elections, current funding problems have resulted in an absence of registration and polling centers in neighboring countries,<sup>34</sup> denying over 2 million eligible Afghan citizens residing in Iran and Pakistan access to vote. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, over 4 million registered and unregistered Afghans currently live in Pakistan and Iran<sup>35</sup>—over 15 percent of Afghanistan's population. Insufficient funding may also retard turnout. An Asia Foundation survey found that only 53 percent of respondents were aware of the upcoming 2009 election, and just under 48 percent said they knew how to register to vote.<sup>36</sup>

## Who Will Win?

The election is up for grabs. Karzai may be the face of Afghanistan in the West, but domestically his legacy is in tatters. His approval rating, once at 83 percent,<sup>37</sup> has declined because he has not improved security or curbed corruption. He can claim some successes: Despite some

setbacks, independent and free media flourish. More students graduated from high school in 2008 than in any previous year, and 40 percent of these graduates were girls.<sup>38</sup> Barred from work under the Taliban, women have resurfaced in sociopolitical arenas, securing 68 parliamentary seats out of 249 in the conservative Afghan parliament.<sup>39</sup>

While Karzai's efforts to set up Afghanistan's democratic and political institutions have been largely successful, he has been less successful making the institutions function properly. Despite billions of dollars spent on development by the United States, its NATO partners, and other donor nations over the past seven years, some 20 million out of an estimated 25 million Afghans living in the country remain below the poverty line,<sup>40</sup> and the country ranked 176 out of 180 nations in Transparency International's 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index, surpassed by only Haiti, Iraq, Myanmar, and Somalia.<sup>41</sup> The *New York Times* has linked Karzai's brother, Ahmad Wali Karzai, to the heroin trade,<sup>42</sup> confirming conventional wisdom among many Afghans.

Karzai's recent offer of amnesty to Taliban leaders, including Mullah Omar—which the Taliban flatly rejected<sup>43</sup>—is meant to slow or reverse his decline in popularity. Pashtun tribes, which make up about 40 percent of Afghanistan's population, support reconciliation with the Taliban. Karzai's maneuver, however, backfired among non-Pashtuns. The independent, pro-United National Front (UNF) daily *Eqtedar-e Melli* described Karzai's amnesty offer as a "reelection ploy";<sup>44</sup> *Payam-e Mojahed*, a weekly affiliated with Jamiat-e Islami, commented that Karzai's actions were "a bid for his own survival";<sup>45</sup> the independent daily *Cheragh* condemned it as "an electioneering gesture";<sup>46</sup> and the independent secular daily *Hasht-e Sobh* described it as "a political gamble."<sup>47</sup>

Can Karzai win a second term? Yes. He remains the strongest candidate, thanks to the fractious nature of the opposition and the absence of a heavyweight Pashtun rival. A recent report by the Congressional Research Service found that Karzai had an estimated 60 percent approval rating, a figure implying support transcending his own ethnic Pashtun community.<sup>48</sup> The Asia Foundation survey drew a similar conclusion.<sup>49</sup> Even if the polls overestimate Karzai's popularity, he benefits from both incumbency and deep-rooted ethnic and political divisions among the opposition. There are eighty-four political parties registered in Afghanistan.<sup>50</sup>

Still, there is real opposition. The main opposition bloc is the UNF (Jabha-e Mottahid-e Melli), a grand alliance of former jihadist factions, ex-Communist leaders,

**TABLE 1**  
**POTENTIAL CANDIDATES FOR THE 2009 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION**

<b>Candidate/Organization</b>	<b>Description</b>
Abdullah Abdullah	Abdullah was an adviser to deceased Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Masoud and served as minister of foreign affairs in Karzai's cabinet from 2002 to 2006. He has not spoken about his plan to run for president, but it is rumored that he will be nominated by the United National Front (UNF). Although his father is an ethnic Pashtun from Kandahar, Abdullah is widely known as a Tajik because of his association with the Northern Alliance.
Hedayat Amin Arsala	With a doctorate in economics from George Washington University, Arsala served as vice president in the transitional administration, was subsequently appointed minister of commerce, and later was appointed senior minister to Karzai. He has not announced his nomination but is rumored to be ready to stand for election.
Ramazan Bashardost	With a doctorate in law from France's Toulouse University, Bashardost served as the planning minister in Karzai's cabinet in 2004–2005. Currently a member of parliament, Bashardost is popular in Kabul for his anticorruption efforts. But his support base is restricted to Hazaras and Kabul residents. He has already announced his candidacy.
Ehsan Bayat	With a bachelor of science in engineering technology from the New Jersey Institute of Technology, Bayat is the founder of Wireless Communication Company, the Bayat Foundation, and Ariana Television Network in Afghanistan. An ethnic Tajik from Kabul, the business tycoon is popular for his charitable work throughout the country. He is rumored to challenge Karzai in the coming vote. Bayat lacks popularity among Pashtuns.
Abdul Rashid Dostum	Karzai appointed Dostum, a pro-Soviet Uzbek militia commander, chief of staff to the commander in chief of the Afghan National Army—a largely ceremonial post. He was removed early this year over a kidnapping case. He came in fourth in the previous presidential election, securing 10 percent of the votes.
Ashraf Ghani	A world-renowned economist, Ghani was a key figure in the formation of the post-Taliban government in Afghanistan. Currently the chairman of the Institute for State Effectiveness, he served as an adviser to the United Nations for the formation of the Bonn Agreement and as finance minister of Afghanistan from 2002 to 2004. His recent harsh criticism of Karzai's government has prompted speculation that he may run for president. An ethnic Pashtun, Ghani has not officially announced his candidacy.
Massouda Jalal	Jalal was the only woman candidate in the 2004 election. She was seventh out of seventeen candidates and then served as the minister of women's affairs. She has said she will run again in the coming election.
Ali Ahmad Jalali	Jalali is a distinguished professor at the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies at the National Defense University. He joined the anti-Soviet resistance as a chief military planner and served as the head of the Pashto and Persian services of Voice of America. He became Karzai's interior minister in 2003. Jalali resigned after two years over alleged differences with Karzai on issues related to appointing provincial governors and dealing with officials involved in the drug trade. He was highly credited for his tough stance on warlords and those involved in the narcotics business.
Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq	Mohaqiq is the chairman of Hezbe Wahdat. He took an active part in the Afghan jihad against the Soviets and joined the Northern Alliance to fight the Taliban. He served as planning minister in Karzai's cabinet, and his party recently joined the UNF. He contested the 2004 presidential election and came in third with 11.7 percent of the votes. He is said to run as an independent candidate.
Ghulam Farouq Najrabi	Najrabi is head of Afghanistan's Independent Party, a little-known political party with national and Islamist tendencies. An ethnic Tajik, he took part in the 2004 elections but received only 0.3 percent of the votes. He has already announced he will run again.
Abdol Latif Pedram	An ethnic Tajik, Pedram is leader of the National Congress Party of Afghanistan. He is a staunch supporter of federalism and secularism and opposes the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan. He became a rather controversial politician after insulting the late King Muhammad Zaher Shah and proposing a name change for Afghanistan. He won the fifth most votes (1.4 percent) in the 2004 presidential election. He has already announced his intention to run.
Abdul Jabar Sabet	Karzai appointed Sabet attorney general of Afghanistan in 2006. He was hailed as the most vigorous anticorruption official in Karzai's administration but lost popularity after failing to pursue charges against senior government officials, including Abdul Rashid Dostum. Launching a raid on Kabul's most famous private television channel, Tolo, also defamed Sabet in the eyes of the people. Karzai fired Sabet after he announced his plans to run for president. Sabet is an ethnic Pashtun but lacks a broad social base in the country. He is said to be a former aide to fugitive mujahedin leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.
Gul Agha Shirzai	Shirzai is currently governor of eastern Nangarhar province. Originally from Kandahar, he was credited for his efforts to rid Nangarhar of opium poppies. He has not spoken about his candidacy but is thought to aspire to the office. <sup>a</sup>
Halim Tanwir	Tanwir, the deputy minister of information and culture, has already announced his candidacy. <sup>b</sup> An ethnic Pashtun, he is hardly known throughout Afghanistan.
UNF	Founded in March 2007, the UNF is a diverse alliance of present and former jihadi factions, ex-Communist leaders, and a number of technocrats. Key members include Borhanuddin Rabbani, former president and leader of the Northern Alliance; Mohammad Qasim Fahim, former defense minister; Yunus Qanuni, parliament's lower house speaker; Ahmad Zia Masoud, Karzai's vice president; Uzbek leader Abdul Rashid Dostum; former Communist leaders such as Sayed Mohammed Golabzoy and Nor-ul-Haq Ulomi; and Hezbe Islami commanders like Qazi Mohammad Amin Waqad. The UNF claims to be backed by 40 percent of Afghanistan's parliament. <sup>c</sup> Rabbani and Qanuni have indicated they will not stand in the election.
Mostafa Zaher	Zaher is the grandson of the late King Muhammad Zaher Shah. He is currently head of Afghanistan's environment preservation department and a member of the UNF. There has been speculation that the UNF will nominate Zaher as its candidate for the upcoming election. Despite being an heir to the royal family, he lacks a popular base.

NOTES: a) Carlotta Gall, Jeff Zeleny, and Larry Rother, "Obama's Visit Renews Focus on Afghanistan," *New York Times*, July 20, 2008.

b) "AG to Contest Elections," *Pajhwok Afghan News*, July 15, 2008, available at [www.pajhwok.com/viewstory.asp?lng=eng&id=58589](http://www.pajhwok.com/viewstory.asp?lng=eng&id=58589) (accessed January 22, 2009).

c) See *NationMaster.com Encyclopedia*, "United National Front (Afghanistan)," available at [www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/United-National-Front-\(Afghanistan\)](http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/United-National-Front-(Afghanistan)) (accessed January 22, 2009).

and various social and ethnic groups. Largely composed of non-Pashtun ethnic minority groups—such as Hezb-e Wahdat-e Eslami-yi Mardom-e Afghanistan (People's Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan), currently chaired by Hazara leader Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq, and Jonbesh-e Melli-e Eslami-yi Afghanistan (Islamic Movement of Afghanistan), led by General Abdul Rashid Dostum—the alliance would have difficulty cobbling together sufficient support to unseat Karzai without appealing to Pashtuns. The coalition has yet to reach a consensus for a candidate (see table 1 for a list of possible candidates). Alliance leader Borhanuddin Rabbani, who backed Karzai in the 2004 election,<sup>51</sup> has ruled out supporting Karzai in the upcoming election.<sup>52</sup> Dostum and Mohaqiq may run independently. UNF leaders have also been unable to overcome poor reputations from their past records. Abdorrah Rasul Sayyaf, a former Northern Alliance leader and current member of parliament from Kabul, is accused by the Human Rights Watch of war crimes during factional fighting in Kabul between 1992 and 1994 and is notorious for continuing to seize people's land in his stronghold, Paghman District in Kabul.<sup>53</sup> Dostum was suspended from the government in February over the abduction of a political rival.<sup>54</sup> He is also rumored to be seeking asylum in Turkey as part of a deal with Karzai to drop all charges against him.<sup>55</sup>

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Former interior minister Ali Ahmad Jalali and former finance minister Ashraf Ghani also present serious challenges to Karzai. Afghans consider both former Karzai cabinet members successful in their positions. While Ghani has not yet officially announced his candidacy, he has been nominated by Ejma-e Melli-e Afghanistan (National Association of Afghanistan), an alliance of thirty-two political parties and 342 people's councils.<sup>56</sup> Jalali is also considering his chances. "I'm in consultation with the Afghan people and tribal elders and will announce my decision whether or not to run for the presidency in one or two months," he said in a November 17 interview.<sup>57</sup> Jalali is opposed to forming alliances and will run on a "national agenda" to win.<sup>58</sup> Still, despite his

achievements, Jalali is not well known among the Afghan masses—mainly because he spent almost two decades out of the country. Only with an extensive and well-funded campaign will he be able to present himself as a real challenger. A plethora of other candidates circulate at the margins.

## When Will the Election Occur?

Even as candidates position themselves, a date for the election has not yet been established. Article 61 of the Afghanistan constitution stipulates that the president's term ends on the first of the Afghan month of Jawza (May 22), and the election must be held between thirty and sixty days before the end of the president's term in office, correlating to the period between March 23 and April 22, 2009. On November 19, Yunus Qanuni, speaker of parliament's lower house, said that Karzai agreed that the election could be held on the date established by the constitution.<sup>59</sup> However, Daud Ali Najafi, head of the IEC, which according to article 156 of the constitution has the authority and responsibility to conduct the election, said the next day that a delay of three months was necessary for holding the election "with full preparedness and transparency." He warned that many people may not have the ability to vote in May, a failure that could "bring the legitimacy of the polls under scrutiny."<sup>60</sup> Zekria Barakzai, deputy head of the IEC, explained that if the election is held on the date set by the constitution because of political pressure, the results will be "illegitimate." He cited cold weather and security as two main obstacles to voting and argued that article 55 of the election law permits the IEC to change the election date.<sup>61</sup> Both parliament and political parties such as the UNF and Hezb-e Democrat-e Afghanistan (Democratic Party of Afghanistan) have voiced opposition to any delay. "Any other dates will contradict the constitution. We are against any changes conflicting with the Afghan constitution," said Borhanuddin Rabbani, leader of the main opposition bloc. "The National Front wants the upcoming election to be held on time, and we don't want an illegitimate president."<sup>62</sup>

Should Afghan parties and organizations reach consensus and postpone the election, the delay will trigger another constitutional question: who will lead the country from May 22 until a winner is declared after the election takes place? Reaching agreement on this question will be difficult; U.S. officials should not assume that Afghans will consent to a continuation of Karzai's tenure. Some

activists suggest that Karzai should hand power to the upper house of the parliament on May 22.<sup>63</sup> Others suggest that the president, according to article 67, transfer authority to the first vice president at the end of his term.<sup>64</sup> The IEC says Karzai's term can continue if the election is postponed,<sup>65</sup> a determination that many Afghan officials have called unconstitutional. "If Mr. Karzai remains in power even a single day after his legal term, which is next year on the first of Jawza, the government will face fierce resistance by all political parties and opposition groups and Afghanistan will lapse into a deeper crisis," said Abdul Kabir Ranjbar, the head of the parliament's Monitoring Commission of the Constitution.<sup>66</sup>

## Can Obama and Karzai Work Together?

During his campaign, Barack Obama was critical of Karzai. On his July 19, 2008, trip to Afghanistan, Obama chided Karzai for not doing enough to promote good governance. "I told President Karzai that I thought that he needs to really focus on issues of corruption and counternarcotics and to counter the narcotics trade much more aggressively than has been done so far."<sup>67</sup> In an earlier interview, he told CNN, "I think the Karzai government has not gotten out of the bunker and helped organize Afghanistan and government, the judiciary, police forces, in ways that would give people confidence."<sup>68</sup> In the second presidential debate on October 7, Obama said, "We have to have a government that is responsive to the Afghan people, and frankly it's just not responsive right now."<sup>69</sup> The last meeting between Vice President Joe Biden and Karzai was reportedly so tense that Biden walked out.<sup>70</sup> Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was the latest to blast Karzai's administration. Just days before taking office, she branded Afghanistan a "narco-state" whose government was "plagued by limited capacity and widespread corruption."<sup>71</sup>

Such criticism is not lost on Afghanistan's population and has fueled speculation that Obama plans to enact his mantra of change here as well. A front-page headline in the independent daily *Arman-e Melli* read, "Obama will begin changes in Afghanistan by dismissing Karzai."<sup>72</sup> And the *Daily Afghanistan* wrote, "The lucky star of President Karzai will fall with the victory of Obama."<sup>73</sup> *Hasht-e Sobh* opined that Obama would seek a replacement for Karzai.<sup>74</sup> The Iranian media has also fueled such speculation. "Americans are trying to call into question the president's popularity and damage his

standing in Afghanistan to replace him with another individual in the forthcoming presidential elections," the Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran said in a special news bulletin on Afghanistan.<sup>75</sup> The Iranian daily *Sarmayeh* described Obama's foreign policy team as a "nightmare" for Karzai.<sup>76</sup>

Karzai's fears that he can no longer take U.S. support for granted are manifested in a recent dramatic shift in attitude. Beyond his outreach to the Taliban, his tone has become more confrontational since Obama's victory. In offering protection for the Taliban's reclusive leader, Mullah Omar, Karzai told the press in Kabul on November 16, "If I say I want protection for Omar, then the international community has two choices: remove me or leave if they disagree. And both are good."<sup>77</sup> Never before has the president described the departure of foreign troops as "good" for the country. In a November 25 speech to a visiting UN Security Council delegation, Karzai for the first time called for a timetable for ending the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan.<sup>78</sup> Karzai's confrontational posture should concern Obama—who, despite enormous domestic and foreign challenges, has pledged to put Afghanistan at the top of his agenda—especially since Karzai's call for a timetable to withdraw foreign forces comes as the Pentagon sends an additional twenty thousand to thirty thousand troops into the theater.<sup>79</sup>

What should Obama do? Holding the 2009 presidential election on time or with only minimal delay as provided by the constitution is essential for Afghanistan's political transformation to democracy and stability. Over 8 million Afghan men and women braved extremists' threats to cast ballots in the 2004 election. Despite poor living conditions, Afghans' support for democracy remains upbeat.<sup>80</sup> For Afghanistan's president to enjoy a future of popular legitimacy, the election must be fair and credible in the eyes of Afghans.

The incoming Obama administration should focus not on individuals, but instead on strengthening democratic institutions in the country. Taking sides in the Afghan election would have many negative implications. First, if the United States backs Karzai to win a second term, this will cast doubt on Afghanistan's independence and portray foreign forces as occupiers. "The more explicit America's role in the Afghan elections," Neumann points out, "the more validation [this gives] to the Taliban's propaganda that the Americans rule the country, not Afghans."<sup>81</sup> Alternatively, if the United States endorses another candidate, the incumbent government will feel threatened and may start to remove officials with U.S. ties and seek out

alternative foreign allies hostile to the United States—Iran and Russia, for example.

America's main objective in Afghanistan is to help that nation establish a government that is democratically elected, is stable, can stand on its own, and is a reliable U.S. friend and ally in the fight against terrorism. This cannot be achieved with an Afghan president who is hostile to the United States and a friend to its foes. Karzai, despite his declining popularity, is still the strongest candidate in the race and has a chance to win a second term. Even if he loses in the coming election, he will remain the president for the next four to eight months. The Obama administration should work with him closely to tackle growing security and governance problems ahead of the election, even as it withholds its endorsement. This will signal that good governance requires transformation of a system and not investment in only one man, however convenient incumbency can be.

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*AEI resident scholar Michael Rubin, research program manager Caroline Sevier, and associate editor Christy Hall Robinson worked with Mr. Majidyar to edit and produce this Middle Eastern Outlook.*

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