



Parliamentary elections: one vote every four is not valid

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On October 20, the Independent Electoral Commission has announced a preliminary list of possible winners of the parliamentary elections held on September 18. Final figures should be announced on October 30 or in November since the Commission still has to verify over 4 thousand complaints it has received regarding candidates and alleged irregularities. It's not by chance that one quarter of the votes were cancelled. Over 50% of new MPs, if they are confirmed, would be new appointees. Almost all the former Assembly leaders have collected less votes than they did in the first parliamentary elections five years ago. The number of the invalid ballots shows how long and still difficult the road to democracy in Afghanistan is. Five million and 600 thousand voters went to the polls, but 1,3 million votes were declared invalid. 224 candidates, including some MPs who aimed to their re-election, were investigated for fraud. Frauds and irregularities were recorded in 2,543 of the 17,744 polling stations opened for voting on September 18.

Despite the 300 attacks on election day "voter turnout in the current situation of the country and the election process can be considered a success," said Fazul Ahmad Manawa, head of the Independent Commission that counts the votes, with a good dose of optimism. Preliminary results, pending claims verification, indicate that there will be 177 new members in the Wolesi Jirga and only 77 MPs re-elected. Muhammad Mohaqiq, a Shiite leader, who, five years ago, got the highest number of preferences (52,686) was elected in Kabul with only 16,166 votes. Muhammad Yunus Qanuni, the outgoing President of the Afghanistan lower house, returned to parliament with only 9 thousand votes, compared to 30 thousand he got in the previous election. Ramazan Bashardost, well known for his battles against corruption, has collected the third highest number of preferences in Kabul district. Behind him we find Abdurab Ustad Rasul Sayyaf, a mujahideen commander during the war against the Soviets and representative of the conservative wing of the Parliament. The real surprise are the "new entries", the newly elected MPs, who largely run as independent from old parliament factions. Usually the Wolesi Jirga is dominated by the opponents of the Afghan President Hamid Karzai. It's unlikely that something will change given the Head of State's falling popularity, but we have to wait a while before figuring out how newly elected members will behave. At the moment, the candidate who got most votes throughout the country is Mullah Tarakhel Muhammani, elected with 26,476 preferences mostly given to him by Kuchi nomads, who have some seats reserved by the Constitution. In Taliban-infested provinces, like Ghazni, all 11 candidates elected are Hazara and none from the Pashtun, who constitute the insurgents' backbone. From Ghazni, after the

2005 elections, six Pashtuns had entered the Parliament. This is another sign that the election result is not sufficiently representative of the real country. 68 Parliament seats are reserved by law to women, but they have won 69 seats. Farida Hamidi and Freshta Amini have won both of the seats assigned to the south western province of Nimroz. There were many cases of blatant fraud like Haleem Muhammad Taraki, candidate in the Herat province. The Election Commission has invalidated all his votes. His brother, Salim Taraki, Mayor of the province capital, Herat - where the regional headquarters of the Italian-led NATO command are stationed - was accused by the prosecutor general that he had used "state property" to elect his relative.

Karzai too close to Pakistan and "open" to the Taliban. The Interior Minister and Intelligence Chief resign

The Afghan government has suffered a severe hit with the resignations, submitted on June 6, of the Interior Minister, Hanif Atmar and the Intelligence Chief (NDS), Amrullah Saleh. The official reason has been tied to the prevented attack to the super reinforced area on the outskirts of Kabul where the Peace Jirga was held, in early June. The traditional Afghan assembly composed of nobles, clerics, and tribal leaders was called by President Hamid Karzai to launch the national reconciliation with those Taliban who were available to negotiate. Atmar and Saleh provided Karzai with investigation preliminary results that were pointing at Taliban's responsibilities. The Americans and NATO confirmed the role of the Haqqani's network too. "He was not interested in the evidence. He treated it like dirt," Saleh said after his resignation. The New York Times revealed that during the meeting Karzai, instead of suspecting the Taliban, seemed convinced that the Americans stood behind the attack. The objective would have been to damage the already weakened President's reputation in front of dignitaries who had come from every Afghanistan corner, to impede Karzai's reconciliation plan, that many consider too audacious and too favourable to Pakistan. "The President is no longer convinced that the international coalition and his own government are able to protect the country," said Saleh. The two former security high officials accused Karzai of being responsible of two behaviors much more serious and dangerous. The first is his rapprochement to Pakistan, which unfortunately is part of the problem since it supports, protects or turns a blind eye to several Taliban factions, including Haqqani's one, an old friend of the ISI, the powerful Islamabad military intelligence agency. The second behavior under consideration is the so-called Karzai's "advanced" reconciliation: he now looks at the Allies with suspect and at the less-diehard Taliban as possible friends. Too many concessions were given at the beginning of the real negotiation and there was the risk that the Taliban could interpret this attitude as being weak. Saleh, after his resignation, made very harsh comments even on the Peace Jirga: "The meaning of the Assembly? I do not want to fight you and I open my doors to you. It was my mistake to push you over the mountains. The Jirga is not a victory for the Afghan state, but for the Taliban." The problem is that the President has really lost trust and confidence with the West, who up until now had supported him in arms, starting with the Americans. The inexorable decline of these relations (at a personal level as well) erupted last year during the presidential election, and the push and pull about Karzai's victory that was more or less undermined by fraud, and with regards to his Tajik rival Abdullah Abdullah. The West has not been kind to the President, and a few months later the White House surprisingly announced its intention to begin withdrawing troops starting in summer 2011. The Taliban have begun to claim victory and Karzai thought that he could not count on the Americans anymore. Paswal Mohammad Munir Mangal has been

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appointed as interim Interior Minister to replace Atmar, while the new temporary Head of Intelligence is the engineer Ibrahim Spinzada. NATO sources have indicated that these resignations "are highly destructive." The real danger is that Karzai would keep on promoting the rapprochement road-map with Pakistan and with the Taliban with impunity and with even fewer restrictions. The U.S. is willing to give him credit up to a certain point, while Russia and India consider this policy to be a threat. The Americans already believe the Afghan President to be incapable of solving the crisis crucial points, such as corruption, and for sure they don't want to have the Taliban in power in Kabul ten years after September 11. Not to mention the dissatisfaction felt by people like Atmar, a Pashtun, former Soviet agent in the eighties, and Saleh, a Tajik, very close to the CIA. A coup or a palace imbroglio in Afghanistan is unlikely, but Karzai's enemies are numerous. In a country at the crossroads of Asia, and in the middle of international relations intrigues, at the next attack it would be easy to avoid protecting the President as efficiently as in the past.

The peace Loya Jirga and the secret negotiations

"Build peace with me and we will no longer need the presence of foreign forces. As long as there is no dialogue between us and we won't work for peace together, we could not let the foreigners go away. The Afghan nation looks at you, waiting for your decision and your advices to start the peace process and for the salvation of Afghanistan." With these words President Karzai opened the meeting of the Peace Jirga convened in Kabul, June 2nd to 4th, in front of 1400 Afghan community representatives, and 20 foreign delegates. The assembly was composed of notables, tribal leaders, politicians, and representatives of civil society, including women who are fighting for women's rights. The meeting ended with a declaration of intent, open to reconciliation and setting targets to be achieved. Here are its main points: the establishment of a permanent peace-building Commission to develop the national reconciliation process and negotiate with the insurgents (both at national and village levels); the release of Taliban prisoners jailed for unsubstantiated allegations or according to biased witnesses originated from their enemies; the appeal to both sides to cease hostilities; the appeal to show flexibility and to not impose preconditions to the negotiations, the government's commitment to take action to remove certain insurgents leaders' names from the United Nations and United States blacklists; the call for insurgents to break ties with al Qaida or other terrorist organizations; the suspension of air strikes in civilian populated areas; the end of unnecessary searches in Afghan homes and of unjustified arrests; the understanding that any peace agreement must respect women's and children's rights. But these points are only good on paper. Abdullah Abdullah, the Tajik competitor in the presidential elections last year, was not attending the Peace Jirga. The Tajiks, despite the fact that one of their leader, the former strongman Mohammad Fahim, is one of the vice presidents, are regrouping and entrenching in the North. Officially, the Taliban, on several occasions, made it clear they do not wish to enter into any negotiations until foreign troops have withdrawn, but secret negotiations with relevant commanders or factions are de-facto on-going. Earlier this year, Karzai's half-brother, Ahmed Wali, the questionable "lord" of Kandahar, had met Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Taliban Shura second in command. The meeting was facilitated by mullah Essa Khakrezwal, the shadow Taliban governor in Kandahar, and by Hafiz Majid, a senior insurgent intelligence chief. Time later Baradar was arrested in Pakistan, in Karachi, thanks to raid jointly conducted with the Americans. Baradar was probably carrying on these negotiations without Islamabad backing,

and Pakistan leadership wants to play a decisive role in any solution concerning the Afghan peace process. Karzai was furious for his unexpected arrest, after years of absconding. The message however was loud and clear. At the end the Afghan President has opened his arms to Pakistan. It is not to be excluded that, if negotiation attempts won't fail, Baradar could be released and reappear from the Pakistani magic hat, with Washington's consent. On the other hand, almost publicly, there have been fruitful contacts with Hezb e Islami's representatives, the Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's old armed party. He is one of the most dangerous warlords in Afghanistan, a Pashtun, and he is now allied with the Taliban. His men are beginning to create serious problems even in the North, relatively quiet until not long ago, especially in the Kunduz, the Pashtun enclave where Hekmatyar was born. In late May Arsala Rahmani, who has long played a role as informal negotiator for the government, met Hekmatyar's son-in-law Humayoun Jareer in the Maldives Islands. In March in Kabul President Karzai met a delegation of Hezb i Islami, one of the three major factions of the insurgency. In a hotel in the capital, the armed party negotiator, Mohammad Daoud Abedi, gave interviews where he explained the negotiations guidelines in accordance with a plan made of 15 points. The obstacle remains the foreign troops' withdrawal, but Hekmatyar's men seem willing to reach a compromise similar to the one stroke in Iraq. One possibility is their gradual withdrawal into few bases, with a set time table for future disengagement. On the 6th of October, the Washington Post revealed that "Taliban representatives and the government of the Afghan President Hamid Karzai have begun secret, high-level, talks over a negotiated end to the war, according to Afghan and Arab sources". According to the newspaper's sources "for the first time they believe that Taliban representatives are fully authorized to speak for the Quetta Shura, the Afghan Taliban organization based in Pakistan, and its leader, Mohammad Omar". If this would be the case it is an important turning point since it shows the Taliban commitment at the highest level. "The Quetta Shura has begun to talk about a comprehensive agreement that would include participation of some Taliban figures in the government and the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops on an agreed timeline".

The American coup de théâtre. The Afghanistan mission change of command and the situation on the ground in view of the disengagement in 2011

At the end of June, the sudden change of command of the NATO mission in Kabul (ISAF), decided in Washington without consulting the allies, was completely unexpected. It arrived in the middle of a difficult U.S. strategy aimed at reversing the tide in the conflict. Gen. Stanley McChrystal was removed and its immediate superior, Gen. David Petraeus, Centcom Commander, was appointed in his place. Gen. McChrystal's dismissal took place after the publication of an article on the magazine "Rolling Stone", but hides something else. It contained very few quotes of the senior officer and a lot of his subordinates, and displayed heavy criticism of the U.S. administration and its staff. At stake was the overall Afghanistan strategy, the standoff between the US military and the administration doves who would prefer retreating as soon as possible, and the possible political aspirations of the two Generals: McChrystal and mostly Petraeus. Military circles in the United States have pointed out right away that "he apologized for the article, but without retracting or refuting a single word." The basic problem here is that the generals want to win the war, but most Obama's administration, starting with the Vice President Joe Biden, thinks only about how getting rid of the Afghan trouble as quick as possible. Behind the McChrystal story there are also hidden political interests. The fired

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General may decide to run in the 2012 presidential elections while there are persistent rumors that say General Petraeus as a possible candidate to challenge Obama's second term. McChrystal has been the best Afghanistan Commander since the war started and by leaving the scene, at least, he won't be left holding the bag if the conflict would end badly. Petraeus is aware of the danger, but he will try to make the public perceive a "victory", even though in reality the real risk is to beat the tattoo. For next November NATO ministerial Meeting, the watchword is to indicate a date when to start leaving the country for real. In December, the Obama administration will carefully examine the effects of the surge decided the year before. On the ground the new strategy set by McChrystal has seen some "progresses", but according to his successor Petraeus the conflict could intensify in the coming months. "In recent times the level of fighting and the number of victims has become higher - said the new NATO Commander in Kabul - we expected it because inevitably things get more difficult before they become easier. My prediction is that we will continue to face hard times. The situation will become more and more challenging as we clear areas that insurgents have so far considered safe." General Petraeus decided to be cautious when he explained that the date of July 2011 given by President Obama for disengagement has to be understood, in reality, "as the beginning of the transition process." Process that would gradually hand over the control of the country to Afghan security forces. President Obama had to admit that it will not be "the date on which we will withdraw our forces quickly, turn off the lights, and close the doors behind us." According to President Karzai the final transition, with the Afghan security forces controlling the whole territory, must be concluded in 2014. Taliban are at the windowsill waiting for the end of next year, they are convinced that in any case NATO has no plans to continue the war.

Musharraf ready to return to politics

Former Pakistani general and president, Pervez Musharraf, announced from his exile in London, that he is founding a new party, the All Pakistan Muslim League (LMTP) and has plans to return home to challenge the current head of state, Asif Ali Zardari, in 2013 elections. In 1999 Musharraf had deposed the then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif with a coup. He became President of Pakistan in 2001 and remained in power until 2008, when he went to exile to avoid legal problems. If he returns home he should face UN investigation charges on the assassination attempt of Benazir Bhutto, former prime minister, Zardari's wife, and ex-leader of the now ruling People's Party. According to UN investigators, the then President Musharraf had failed to guarantee adequate security during her electoral journey to Karachi on 27 December 2007, where she was killed. In addition to this Musharraf is also likely to be prosecuted for having arrested the Supreme Court Judges who opposed him, three years ago, in his attempt to stay in power. Pakistani Interior Minister, Rehman Malik, said that Musharraf "should come back to his country to face the trials that see him accused." The Prime Minister, Yusuf Raza Gillani, has argued that the ex-general can return whenever he wants "but the Supreme Court Head will be there waiting for him." Nobody wants him in his way with the possibility that he would find again some political success and followers, also because of the resentment that is rising against the political class and the government; particularly for the insufficient reaction to the tragedy of the flood that has involved 20 million people. The army commander, Gen. Ashfaq Kayani, Musharraf's successor in office, may also oppose his return. The Prime Minister has granted Kayani with an extension of his command beyond its end due in October. Two years ago the

General had granted a smooth way out to Musharraf who went abroad and abandoned his political ambitions in exchange for not being arrested and having his court proceedings frozen.

Pakistan tragic floods insufficient response is mining the trust in the government and helping the Islamic extremists

Last August flood risks to have devastating effects on Pakistan economy and political stability and to favor the Islamic radical formations' penetration. These groups managed to grant a better management of the helps, thus recruiting among the young evacuees. A substantial effort in the reconstruction is also produced by NGOs tied to the extremists. The natural disaster has caused "only" 1,752 victims, but the damage is enormous. The flood is considered by experts as worse of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and of the Kashmir earthquake in 2005. Twenty million people were affected by floods in different parts of the country, starting with the most productive and cultivated southern regions. There are nearly 2 million destroyed houses and 5 million people lost everything. "If this human mass won't quickly find a suitable setup in terms of temporary residences, food, medical assistance and rehabilitation of his own economy, they will become the potential breeding ground for social disorders," said Kamran Bokhari, director for South Asia of Stratfor. The most obvious problem is the mobilization of various charities linked to Islamic militant groups who have been outlawed in Pakistan, and blacklisted in the United States and the UN. The Institute for Conflict Management (ICF), a think tank specialized on South Asia, said that on the ground are active "militant groups such as Harakat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI), Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), Harakat-ul-Mujahideen (HUM), Jama'at-ud-Da'awa (JUD), Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), and Islamic radical formations such as Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI), they are taking advantage of the floods and raising money for the flood victims." The helps are often distributed in more effective and fast ways by humanitarian associations of façade, tied to extremists, as Jama'at-ud-Da'awa, who had already done the same during the earthquake in Kashmir. Anger rises among the unfortunate people who have lost everything and complain against the government who is accused of having reacted late and badly to the emergency. Even the Army could play a more autonomous role if the executive will fail facing the crisis and the reconstruction. It is not likely it will repeat the endemic Pakistani-style coup d'état, but it will try getting the situation under control to avoid that extremists, as the Pakistani Taliban, could recruit new manpower among the homeless young people. The Pakistani President Zardari, harshly criticized for not having returned home at the beginning of the disaster and continuing his trip to Europe, has launched this alarm with the English press. According to the head of state "it will take at least three years" before the country can recover from the floods. The fear that extremists may use the disaster for their own purposes is concrete: "I've always seen these organizations (terrorist, ed.) taking advantage of humanitarian crises. The new challenge is to prevent them from exploiting the situation." Zardari fears that the militiamen "would take these orphans and bring them in their training camps, to make them the terrorists of tomorrow."

Pakistani Taliban's threat expands while Sunni old extremists groups revive

Rehman Malik, the Islamabad Interior Minister, has said to the parliament that "the Pakistani Tehrek-e-Taliban (which collects a dozen groups of local Taliban extremists, ed.) is now widespread throughout the country, but we will go after them wherever they are." In recent months Taliban violence has increased in the southern provinces of Punjab and Sindh, mostly thanks to Sunni extremist groups that have targeted religious minorities. Several extremist

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groups, banned in Pakistan, have joined the Taliban and al Qaida and now cooperate to destabilize the country. Malik himself has stated that militia organizations such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Jaish-e-Muhammad, and Sipah-e-Sahaba, were trained in areas under local Taliban control and infiltrated by al Qaeda in the tribal region of Waziristan. "They had stayed hidden in South Punjab and have now come in the open and extended their terrorist network way up to the Baluchistan Province," said the Interior Minister. The great southern port of Karachi, a city of 12 million inhabitants, nicknamed the Pakistani Wall Street, has been a safe haven for Taliban and Sunni extremists for years. About 5 million Pashtu live in Karachi and it is easy for Taliban cells mixing themselves in this mass. In the city and its surroundings Taliban raise money, treat their wounded and recruit new members through a network of extremist madrassas (Koranic schools). The Americans have increased strikes with remote piloted aircraft to hit the highest ranking extremist commanders who lurk in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. In May Saeed al Masri, also known as Abu al Yazdi, was killed. He was al-Qaeda number three in the chain-of-command, an ideologue of Egyptian origin, but also a military strategist, who had begun fighting against the Soviets in the eighties. In early September the Uzbeks militants organization, who had found refuge in the tribal area, was beheaded by the drones. On September 22 an unconfirmed news was leaked that the German Bekkay Harrach, alias Abu Talha al Alman, had been killed by the latest attack from the sky. Since 2007, he had joined the international holy war to become a catalyst for westerner al Qaida volunteers. The recent terrorism alert in Europe has sprung from interceptions and information that pointed out a possible plot in the Pakistanis tribal areas thanks to the "international brigade" of volunteers linked to Jihad. Many arrive from Europe. A couple of German Muslim fighters recently captured in Afghanistan and Pakistan confirmed the plan. Among 15 and 20 Englishmen, to a large extent of Pakistani origin, have been reported present in the tribal area training camps.

On September 8 a CIA drone attack has eliminated the English Abdul Jabbar, who was involved in the failed plot. The problem is that the European brigade of young people devoted to al Qaeda ideology is increasing its number. The German secret services argue that 220 "volunteers" have already travelled from Germany to Pakistan and Afghanistan in search of the holy war. For seventy of them there is "clear evidence" that they have been militarily trained. A third of these German Jihad soldiers have already returned home but, according to Islamabad, at least 60 Europeans would still be nested in North Waziristan, close to Afghanistan border. Many of these "Europeans" are protected by the Haqqani clan, one of the smallest, but most dangerous guerrilla formations in Afghanistan. The charismatic figure is the elderly Jalaluddin Haqqani who fought against the red army and has been a Minister of the Taliban Islamic emirate. Today the operational command is held by his son Sirajuddin who devoted himself to the international holy war. The Haqqani clan has always been linked and financed by the ISI, the Pakistani military secret service. It's not by chance that Islamabad's military leaders are convinced that also the Haqqani clan has to be invited at the peace negotiation with the Afghan President Karzai.