



Afghanistan's Fraught Political Transition and Implications for Its Security Beyond 2014

By Joanna Agin

On Saturday, June 14, Afghanistan held its second round, run-off presidential election since no presidential candidate was able to secure at least 50 percent of the votes in the first-round election on April 5. In that first contest, the two front-runners, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah and Dr. Ashraf Ghani, [won](#) 45 percent and 31.56 percent of the vote, respectively. Both rounds of the election were marred by widespread allegations of fraud, as Afghanistan aimed to complete the first democratic transfer of power in its history. But the transition has been fraught. Allegations of fraud and disagreement between Abdullah and Ghani have led to an audit of the voting that has caused the election process to continue into August. The election events of June and July have implications not only for the installation of a new president of Afghanistan, but also for Afghanistan's future regarding the continuing security situation and the presence of U.S. troops post-2014. The U.S. government has made a concerted effort to solve election disputes between the candidates but the future of the Afghan government and of the international community's role there remains unclear.

A Summary of Election Events

While Taliban-initiated violence failed to disrupt the run-off election significantly, allegations of serious fraud have called the results into question. Within 24 hours of the run-off election taking place, 275 complaints were [registered](#) with the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) and by June 16, the final day to file election-related complaints, the ECC had [received](#) over 2,558 complaints. Both the Abdullah and Ghani camps reported dozens of cases to the ECC, but Abdullah was particularly vocal in his charges. On June 15, Abdullah called for the suspension of the Independent Electoral Commission's (IEC) Chief Electoral Officer, Zia-ul-Haq Amarkhail, who on election day had been [stopped](#) by police as he left the IEC offices in Kabul with many unused ballots in his car on his way to an unknown location. Abdullah [released](#) a number of [recorded](#) phone conversations implicating Amarkhail and other central and provincial government officials in a conspiracy to commit fraud in Paktika province. Bowing to pressure, IEC Chief Electoral Officer Amarkhail [resigned](#) his post, but did not admit guilt. Still frustrated with the government's seeming reluctance to address Abdullah's claims of fraud, Abdullah's campaign manager told the *New York Times* on June 29 that their team would [reject](#) "all decisions and activities of the IEC, which will not have any legal value anyway."

Abdullah again lambasted the IEC when, on July 7, the body [announced](#) the preliminary results of the run-off, putting Ghani ahead with 56.44 percent of the vote and Abdullah behind with 43.56 percent. According to the IEC, 8,109,403 votes were [counted](#) and Ghani led Abdullah by 1,024,249 votes. Abdullah [received](#) over 75 percent of votes cast in Badakhshan, Bamyan, Daikondi, Kapisa, Panjshir, and Parwan provinces. Ghani [received](#) over 75 percent of votes in Jawzjan, Kandahar, Khost, Kunar, Laghman, Logar, Nangarhar, Paktia, Paktika, Wardak, and Zabul provinces. The Abdullah campaign's spokesman flatly [rejected](#) the results.

A U.S.-Brokered Agreement: From a “Parallel Government” to a “National Unity Government”

The electoral crisis deepened as a loyal partner of Abdullah, powerful Balkh Provincial Governor Atta Mohammad Noor, posted a statement to Facebook on July 7, [saying](#) that the IEC’s announcement of the preliminary votes “paves the ground for the next measures, from massive protests to the formation of a parallel government.” On July 8, thousands of Abdullah supporters protested in Kabul, calling for a “parallel government” as Abdullah declared victory and [claimed](#) that the marred results were a “coup” against the Afghan people. The calls for a parallel government and Abdullah’s declaration of victory focused the incumbent Afghan government and the international community on the threat that the electoral crisis posed to the integrity of the Afghan state. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry warned the presidential candidates against any unconstitutional maneuvers, [stating](#), “Any action to take power by extra-legal means will cost Afghanistan the financial and security support of the United States and the international community.” On July 9, President Obama called Abdullah and urged restraint. Officials [credit](#) this phone call with providing the necessary time for Secretary Kerry to arrive in Kabul to negotiate an agreement with both candidates. A July 14 *New York Times* article [suggests](#) that Afghanistan was in real danger of slipping into civil war in the days after the preliminary results were announced. Abdullah supporters were prepared to [mobilize](#) across Afghanistan and secure the Presidential Palace for Abdullah.

Late on July 10, Secretary of State John Kerry arrived in Kabul to [meet](#) with Abdullah, Ghani, and incumbent President Hamid Karzai. After a day of inconclusive meetings on July 11, Kerry extended his stay. On July 12, after 44 hours of one-on-one meetings between Kerry and the candidates, the three men held a joint press conference and [announced](#) an agreement.

The agreement had two main components: an [audit](#) of all votes cast and the formation of a “national unity government” that would eventually be formalized as a more parliamentary system through a [change](#) of the Afghan constitution. Regarding the audit, the agreement called for NATO troops to [fly](#) ballot boxes from the provinces to Kabul, where international and domestic observers, overseen by United Nations (UN) personnel, would evaluate votes contained in approximately 23,000 ballot boxes. The audit would be conducted based on standards provided by both the IEC and the UN.

Regarding the governmental changes, the deal instructed that a Loya Jirga decide the precise form of government in the next two to three years, and suggested a parliamentary democracy led by a prime minister as head of government and a president as a head of state. [According](#) to the Afghan constitution, the Loya Jirga is the only national body that can draft and implement changes to the constitution. As an interim measure, the agreement [outlined](#) that the winner of the run-off election would appoint the loser as his “chief executive,” but did not specify what that role would entail. Abdullah and Ghani have continued to [disagree](#) about the responsibilities of the “chief executive” position. For example, Abdullah’s running mate for First Vice President, Mohammed Khan, stated that the loser would [work](#) as chief executive in the new government for two years and would then be designated as prime minister by a Loya Jirga. The Second Vice President candidate on Ghani’s ticket, Sarwar Danish, offered a differing

interpretation, indicating that it is wrong to think the loser would eventually assume the position of prime minister but not offering an alternative interpretation.

The Audit Drags On

The audit [began](#) on July 18 at IEC Headquarters in Kabul and has operated in fits and starts ever since. The process was put on [hold](#) on July 20 following a dispute between Ghani and Abdullah observers over how the ballots were being examined. In those first two days, observers [audited](#) only 435 ballot boxes, far fewer than the IEC's [goal](#) of at least 1,000 per day. As disputes continued and the pace of the audit remained slow, the UN and the IEC [halted](#) the process on July 23 and the presidential candidates requested a meeting to sort out flaws in the process. Later that day, the United Nations [held](#) a meeting at IEC headquarters to develop a plan to carry out the remainder of the audit. On July 24, the audit resumed, but stalled again just a day later due to disputes among observers regarding the standards used to audit ballots. On July 30, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) [proposed](#) a final set of criteria for evaluating ballots. Despite objections from Abdullah, the IEC accepted the proposal and the audit resumed on August 3 without the participation of Abdullah's observers. After a meeting with IEC and UN officials on August 4, Abdullah [resumed](#) cooperation with the IEC and his observers rejoined the audit process.

Prior to the delays in the audit process, IEC officials [predicted](#) that the audit would take at least three weeks, thus delaying the presidential inauguration originally scheduled for August 2. On August 6, the IEC [announced](#) that the audit would last another 20 days. It is unclear how the IEC made this determination, however, given how inconsistent the audit process has been to date. As of August 11, only 6,393 out of 23,000 ballot boxes were [audited](#). The IEC's August 6 goal of completing the audit in 20 days thereafter will likely be missed.

Why the Timetable Matters: The Upcoming NATO Summit

The international community — and particularly the United States — have a compelling interest in seeing Afghanistan's next leader installed soon. NATO will be holding its next summit in Wales from September 4-5, during which leaders are expected to [discuss](#) the end of the NATO mission in Afghanistan and the role the alliance will play in Afghanistan's future. NATO leaders will be hampered in their planning without a status of forces agreement between the alliance and Afghanistan, however. The U.S. similarly [requires](#) a Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with Afghanistan to facilitate its post-2014 military and financial support to the country. President Karzai has refused to [sign](#) the BSA, preferring to leave this responsibility to the next president. NATO leaders, including NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, have strongly [urged](#) Afghanistan's leaders to sign the requisite agreements with NATO members before the September 4 summit.

Secretary Kerry tried to address the problem of the NATO summit during a return trip to Kabul on August 7. He [brokered](#) a second accord between the candidates, getting them to agree on a timeline for the election's conclusion and to set an inauguration date before the end of August. This puts significant pressure on the IEC to finish the audit soon, as well as on the candidates to refrain from interfering in that process. Kerry [called on](#) the candidates not to get bogged down in

“endless debates over minor discrepancies that are unlikely to affect the final results” and to respect the audit and its result. To accelerate the audit, the European Union [sent](#) 100 additional observers to Kabul. Despite the presence of additional observers, it will be a challenge for the IEC to complete the audit in the allotted time based on the pace of progress thus far.

The questions of whether the audit will be completed and whether there will be a newly inaugurated leader of Afghanistan representing the country in Wales remain unanswered. Although there has been no significant opposition to President Karzai remaining in power for the duration of the audit, some elements of the international community have [expressed](#) reservations at the prospect of Karzai attending the summit. With no replacement immediately forthcoming, Karzai’s continuation in the role of president enters constitutionally murky waters. Without the presence of international troops, the Afghan National Security Forces will have a difficult time maintaining security across the country, particularly if the current trend of [increasing](#) violence across the south and east of the country continues unabated through the rest of the year and beyond.

During Kerry’s August visit to Kabul, he also addressed further details about the national unity government. The document drafted on August 8 during his visit [reaffirmed](#) the agreement made in July, but included the [signatures](#) of both Abdullah and Ghani, unlike the previous agreement. Similar to the agreement negotiated during his July visit, there were few publicly available details of the framework. The August agreement included a provision for the establishment of the position of a chief executive and recommended the calling of a Loya Jirga, but also [required](#) that the candidates form a commission to [determine](#) the structure of the future government of Afghanistan prior to the Loya Jirga’s formation. Despite their ongoing reservations, then, both candidates have committed themselves to participate in the national unity government.

Conclusion

Afghanistan’s attempt at a democratic transition of power has resulted in an election crisis that, coupled with the [ongoing](#) violence in critical parts of the country and around Kabul, have put Afghanistan at real risk of faltering. Fraud carried out on election day, complaints of fraud to the relevant governmental bodies, and the inefficiency of those offices to carry out an audit have resulted in an extensive delay in the inauguration of a new president of Afghanistan. This delay has important implications not only for the transition of power within Afghanistan, but also for Afghanistan’s future prospects. Without a new president, the status of Afghanistan’s representation at the NATO summit in Wales and of the Bilateral Security Agreement, which will ensure U.S. military and financial aid beyond 2014, remain unclear. The deal brokered by Secretary Kerry to end the election deadlock has been an additional source of disagreement among the candidates, as many of the details of the framework have not yet been elucidated and the candidates have different interpretations of its meaning. Which candidate will assume which office and how they will respond to their country’s top priorities of containing violence and helping to set the future political structure is not only important for Afghans themselves but for the United States and the international community.