

## **Afghanistan: Human Rights Concerns in Run-Up to Elections**

### **Risks of Low Women's Vote, Violence, and New Government Militia**

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(New York) - Afghans continue to have significant human rights concerns about the preparation and plans for the upcoming presidential election on August 20, 2009, Human Rights Watch said today. It will be Afghanistan's second presidential election since the fall of the Taliban in 2001.

"While holding elections is an achievement under the circumstances, questions remain about whether Afghans will really be able to exercise their right to vote," said Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "Violence, plans to use irregular security forces at polling stations, unequal access of candidates to state media, and conditions affecting women are of particular concern."

Human Rights Watch's primary election-related concerns are:

#### **1. Women's Participation**

Cultural obstacles and the risk of attacks against women by the Taliban and other insurgent groups present significant obstacles to women's participation as voters and candidates. In the run-up to polling day, the government, the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), the international military, the United Nations, and international donors have done little to counter these challenges. As a result, critical issues such as ensuring that enough women are available to carry out security checks of women voters at polling stations were addressed too late to recruit adequate numbers. Security arrangements for women candidates were similarly disorganized and ineffective, with bodyguards promised by the Ministry of Interior not materializing in many areas.

"Women voters have been badly let down by their government and its international backers," said Adams. "To leave challenging problems like recruiting female staff to the weeks before the election was a serious failing."

#### **2. Election-Related Violence**

The Taliban and other insurgents have been responsible for most of the pre-election violence. Between April 25 and August 1, there were at least 13 politics-related killings and at least 10

abductions of Electoral Commission officials, candidates, and campaign workers. Several provincial council candidates have withdrawn after receiving death threats. Some insurgent factions also warned voters not to go to the polls.

The overall security situation is considerably worse than during the last elections, in 2004-2005. One Afghan man told Human Rights Watch, "In Zabul, you can't go around without a turban - security for the elections is less than weak."

Many Afghans nonetheless remain undeterred. One young female election observer told Human Rights Watch: "It's in our destiny to take our rights. We should not be scared of anyone."

### **3. Tribal Militia**

Human Rights Watch said that security concerns in Afghanistan should not be used to justify the hasty creation of another irregular armed militia. The government has initiated a plan to recruit up to 10,000 "community defense forces" in areas where insecurity and insufficient police and army meant polling stations might not open. The Electoral Commission says that only official Afghan security forces and police should provide security at polling stations, but it is not clear that this will be observed.

"The credibility of this election should not be further compromised by the use of irregular security forces that may work for a particular candidate," said Adams. "Security for voters will not be increased by the presence of armed groups who may open the way for fraud and intimidation."

### **4. Independence of the Electoral Commission**

The independence of the Electoral Commission was compromised by the insistence of President Hamid Karzai that he should appoint the head of the commission without any parliamentary oversight. He chose Azizullah Ludin, who has displayed clear bias against some opposition candidates, including attempts to pressure the Electoral Complaints Commission to exclude certain candidates, and publicly criticizing the caliber and mental health of others. There have also been complaints made by candidates and monitoring officials also have raised questions about the impartiality and behavior of some of the commission's field staff.

### **5. Abuse of Governmental Power**

There have been widespread abuses of power, including misuse of government resources and violations of the presidential decree on noninterference by government officials, most of which have benefitted Karzai. The result is that the playing field for all candidates is not level, undermining the extent to which these elections will be seen as fair.

## **6. Equal Access to the Media**

The governmental Media Commission has criticized the lack of impartiality in coverage of the presidential campaign, while largely commending the balance of reporting on provincial council elections. The state broadcaster, RTA, has been harshly criticized for favoring the incumbent, with the Media Commission reporting that 67 percent of coverage went to Karzai, with Dr. Abdullah Abdullah coming in second, with only 8 percent of coverage. Afghan journalists outside the major urban centers have told media-monitoring organizations that they are under pressure from the supporters of local candidates.

## **7. Risk of Wide-Scale Fraud and Voter Disenfranchisement**

The potential for fraud in the elections has been well-documented by organizations including the Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA), the UN/Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, the International Crisis Group, and the Afghan Analysts Network. Voter-registration problems, multiple voting, fraudulent proxy voting, ballot stuffing, false tabulation of results, and other improprieties by Electoral Commission field staff could undermine the legitimacy of the results. The risks are greatest in areas with very limited or no presence of independent observers.

Human Rights Watch recognizes the huge challenges involved in holding elections in Afghanistan with weak state institutions and a major insurgency in large parts of the country. Statements from a range of national and international entities, including the Electoral Commission itself, FEFA, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, and international armed forces appear to be designed to reduce expectations of a free and fair election.

"Attempts to dampen expectations before the poll should not become an attempt to downplay serious levels of fraud, disenfranchisement, abuses of power, and violence," said Adams.

<http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/08/17/afghanistan-human-rights-concerns-run-elections>

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