



On September 18, Afghanistan will hold elections for Parliament and Provincial Councils, reserving many seats for women, and signaling yet another important milestone in the country’s long road to full democracy. Approximately 5,700 candidates, including 575 women, are vying for 669 seats nationwide (249 seats in the Lower House of the National Assembly, known as the Wolesi Jirga, and 420 seats on the Provincial Councils). These elections offer multiple, wide-open contests for political office as opposed to last year’s single presidential race with a largely uncontested winner. These polls present great challenges, as well as hold great promise for the people of Afghanistan.

Afghanistan remains very fragile. Insecurity has increased over the summer and, in some rural areas, there is less willingness to wait peacefully for the pledges regarding enhanced security and greater opportunity to be fulfilled by the Afghan Government, with assistance from the international community.



A voter in the 2004 presidential election.
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The weeks leading up to this Sunday’s elections have been marred by violence and political intimidation - including the murders of six candidates and four people working to provide voter education. Afghanistan remains the poorest country in Asia¹ and faces severe gaps in all public sectors including health, education and water. Given the pressing needs, Afghans rightly fear the onset of “donor fatigue,” which would threaten the success of a new government before it has even taken office.

These elections will be among the largest the UN has ever sponsored. In Kabul Province alone, they will be on the same scale of those held in Kosovo. Logistical challenges include over 26,000 polling stations scattered across the country, lengthy and complicated ballots -- in Kabul Province, for example, the ballot is seven pages long with 617 names for 62 positions -- and an election force of well over 150,000 people.

Despite such difficulties, these polls offer a significant opportunity for the widespread participation and representation of many of the country’s most vulnerable populations, who have been disenfranchised by more than 25 years of conflict. In a nation traditionally led by men, thirty percent of the seats in the Lower House and Provincial Councils are reserved for women.

¹ United Nations Development Program, 2005

True Voice

“We voted, we will vote again”²

CARE recently conducted an election survey among participants in its Humanitarian Aid Program for Women of Afghanistan (HAWA), and CARE Afghan staff.³ The majority of women surveyed expressed overwhelming enthusiasm for the upcoming elections. They were quick to show their voter registration cards from the 2004 presidential election and indicate their support for President Hamid Karzai’s ongoing efforts.

Despite their identification of ongoing problems related to security and economic opportunities, women articulated their belief that, “Karzai is good because there is no war, no fighting”⁴ They also recognized the importance of the upcoming elections, stating they “will give him legislation” and assist him in improving the country’s situation.⁵

Humanitarian Assistance for the Widows of Afghanistan (HAWA)

CARE is committed to supporting disenfranchised women and seeks ways to provide them with sustainable livelihoods. Through the HAWA program, CARE provides support to more than 10,000 women through numerous activities including: food distribution, support for maternal and newborn health, literacy programs, a saving and credit initiative, income generation activities, vocational training and employment referral services.

Out of an estimated 90 potential voters, only five said they did not vote last year nor planned to vote this year. All of the other women were very committed to exercising this right. Over 3 million women voted in the 2004 presidential elections, and this year there are over 700,000 women across the country newly registered to vote. This represents some 44 percent of the total new registrants. The percentage of women registering this year is slightly higher nationwide than last year – with significant increases in southern areas.



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High Hopes

“The elections will solve our problems – they will bring peace, not anger, not problems”⁶

In Kabul, expectations for the representatives and political bodies are extremely high, particularly among the poor and less educated. The Lower House and Provincial Councils are seen as the link

² From a survey about the elections performed by The Human Rights Research and Advocacy Consortium (HRRAC). HRRAC is a consortium of 15 Afghan and international NGOs, including CARE. See CARE press release “Survey: Afghan Voters Worry ‘Guns and Money’ Will Affect Historic Election

³ CARE International in Afghanistan has 900 Afghan staff

⁴ CARE Survey.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

between government and the people – where honest and fair representatives will push for the needs and rights of their constituencies, including access to schools, clinics and economic opportunity. One HAWA participant commented, “the government will make it so women can go outside of their house, to obtain work.” Another woman explained that “life will be better, children will go to school.”⁷

However, such positive views are not universally shared. Some people are not voting because they are not impressed with any of the candidates. Others fear commanders and other powerful candidates with questionable pasts who may seek legitimization through the elections.

Realistic expectations

The effectiveness of the new parliament will rest on many issues, including the representatives themselves and their willingness to work together for the good of all Afghanistan. However even with a parliament full of well-meaning representatives, many challenges lie ahead, including:

- Lack of clearly defined powers and responsibilities – The laws regulating both the Lower House and the Provincial Councils are not clear and will be open to wide interpretation.
- Lack of understanding of what the job entails – The laws governing the role of the Provincial Councils were only released on August 21st – weeks after the deadline for candidate registration.⁸ Among the candidates, there are widely differing views about the roles and responsibilities of an elected official.
- Lack of political parties – The Single Non-Transferable Vote system (SNTV) selected by President Karzai and established in this election sets up candidates to stand as individuals rather than as members of political parties. In fact, party symbols are banned from the election ballot. The lack of established political parties and coalitions may make it more difficult for Parliament and the Provincial Councils to govern. The large number of non-party affiliated individual members will need to find common ground and form coalitions during their terms.
- Lack of an Upper House of Parliament – Representatives for the Upper House will consist of people elected from the Provincial Councils and the District Councils, and appointed by the President Karzai. District Council elections are tentatively scheduled for next year but many obstacles remain. District boundaries need to be set and new voter registration procedures by district must take place before these elections can occur.
- International Support – After the elections, the Afghan government will remain dependent on international support. It is critical that the international community continue to fulfill its pledges and make the necessary investments to ensure that Afghanistan continues along the path toward becoming a stable and prosperous democratic state.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ IWPR, “Provincial Candidates Running in the Dark”, retrieved on September 13, 2005 from http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/arr/arr_200509_185_3_eng.txt.

Mixed Emotions

Enthusiasm for the elections is tempered by concerns about some of the candidates and security.

“We are not interested in all [candidates] and some are not good. But we are interested in our favorites and we will vote for them.”⁹

General feelings towards the candidates varied from complete faith in their sincerity to disillusionment with military commanders and others seeking power. Many women participating in HAWA knew a candidate or two from their districts and expressed great confidence in these individuals. However, many of the widows did not know candidates for the Lower House of Parliament (Wolesi Jirga). As one woman remarked, “We are illiterate, we do not have radios or TV, and so we can’t learn about the candidates.” For many of the women the thousands of posters that mark Kabul are simply pictures of strange faces and odd symbols.¹⁰



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Despite this lack of familiarity, the women expect their representatives to be honest, friendly and fair. HAWA participants remarked that representatives should, “be persons who will look after the poor, look towards the future and rehabilitation,” and, “show the way for us, assist us.”¹¹ The women are emphatic that representatives should not be self-serving.

“The representatives must not build buildings for themselves”¹²

The Role of Violence

In its work throughout the country CARE Afghan staff has noted the potential influence of commanders on the elections, citing their weapons, political power and often government connections.¹³ Roughly two-thirds of the staff, all Afghans, expressed the opinion that there will be pressure from military commanders and others linked to armed groups on Election Day.

The weeks leading up to the elections have been marred by numerous incidents including threats to candidates, removal of campaign materials, and violence. Six candidates have been killed and a large number of candidates, including many women, have had their campaigns greatly restricted due to intimidation and violence.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

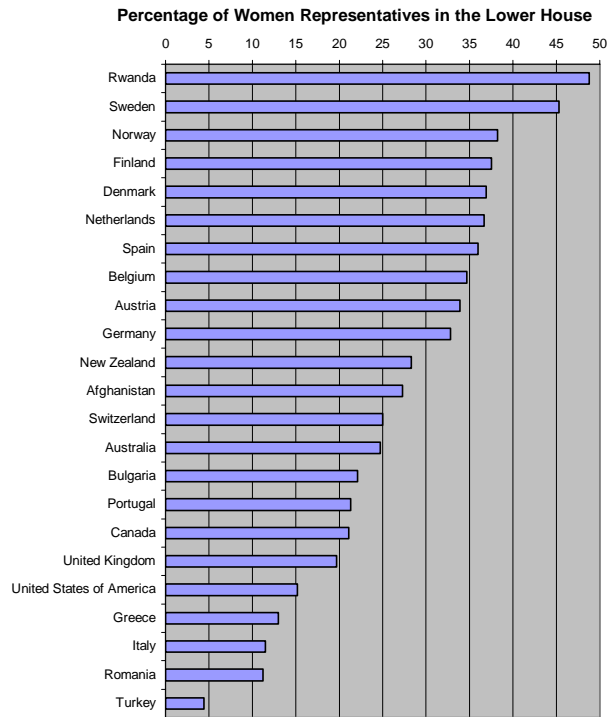
- A woman candidate for parliament was shot and wounded by gunmen as she campaigned in the eastern province of Nuristan.¹⁴
- A male candidate's parents were beaten – the father until he was unconscious -- and their house ransacked with all elections materials (e.g., posters) destroyed in the middle of the night by armed men who demanded that the candidate remove himself from the elections.¹⁵
- After a threatening phone call warning her to withdraw her candidacy, a woman candidate was hit by a car in Mazar-e Sharif, Balkh Province. The candidate sustained serious injuries in the incident.¹⁶

Many such attacks are attributed to other candidates who are reported to be involved with armed groups. This summer the Electoral Complaints Commission received 1,144 complaints against 557 different candidates. The Commission has only officially banned 32 from running for office because of links to armed groups – 21 candidates were disqualified on Monday, September 13, just five days before the election. That same day, some hundred people protested the removal of one candidate accused of being affiliated with an armed group – his campaign manager threatened violence.¹⁷

Making a Place for Women

“Women are denied in this country - the government will give the women their rights for the first time”¹⁸

Overall, women will make up almost 30 percent of Provincial Councils and the Lower House. The reservation of seats for women is a positive step, especially in a country where most women were not allowed to attend school or work outside the home only five years ago. This will rank Afghanistan approximately 22nd in the world in terms of number of elected female representatives. Afghanistan will have almost double the percentage of women in its Lower House than the U.S. House of Representatives (15.2 percent).¹⁹



Women candidates currently make up

¹⁴ Reuters, “Kabul says Taliban cannot derail Afghan vote,” Retrieved on Sept. 15, 2005 from <http://in.today.reuters.com/news/newsArticle.aspx?type=worldNews&story>.

¹⁵ Candidate interview, interviewed by Scott Braunschweig, September 12, 2005.

¹⁶ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, “Female Candidate in Northern Afghanistan survives attempt on her life” Retrieved on September 16, 2005 from http://www.afgha.com/?af=pr&new_topic=19&catid=&order=.

¹⁷ Reuters, “Afghans Protest over Candidates Disqualification”, retrieved on September 13, 2005 from <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/ISL256210.htm>.

¹⁸ CARE survey.

¹⁹ Inter-Parliamentary Union, Women in National Parliaments, retrieved on September 13, 2005 from <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>. Note that this is also the source for the table.

approximately 10 percent of all candidates. The acceptance of female representation among the broader populace falls along gender and geographical lines – women face the most opposition from men in rural areas. In Kabul, there is widespread acceptance of women candidates. One male CARE staffer explained that there are no problems, “if the female candidates are qualified, experienced and good to their people.” Outside of Kabul, however, many CARE staff believe that there was a “reaction” to female candidates and that many were unhappy that they were allowed to run.²⁰ As noted above, there have been multiple incidences of intimidation and violence towards women candidates in many provinces.

The Road Ahead

Afghans hold very high expectations of their government and of the international community. The current Afghan administration, newly elected representatives and members of Provincial Councils -- with support from donor nations and international organizations -- must step up to improve present conditions, not step back. Joint efforts are necessary to institutionalize the rule of law in the country and to support the new political institutions that will emerge from these polls in order for all Afghans, especially women, to effectively and fully participate in civil society. In concrete terms, that means increased resources for enhanced security, including disarmament, demobilization and reintegration efforts, the reform of the judicial system, increased support for health, economic opportunities and education, including civic education and women’s political engagement. If Afghanistan’s promise is to be fulfilled, no one can fail to heed the clear call of the Afghan people for action.

About CARE: CARE, one of the world's largest international humanitarian organizations, helps people and communities achieve lasting solutions to poverty. CARE began operations in Afghanistan in 1961 and has more than 900 staff in the country. Programs focus on rebuilding rural infrastructure, water and sanitation, education, food distribution, vocational training, and emergency response. For more information about CARE, please visit www.care.org

For more information about this report please contact:

Scott Braunschweig, Advocacy Coordinator, CARE Afghanistan,

Scott, braunschweig@care.org.af; Kabul: +93 70 040711

Paul Barker, Country Director, CARE Afghanistan, barker@care.org; Kabul: +93 70 285688

Alina Labrada, Advocacy Communications Officer, labrada@care.org; Atlanta: +1 404 979 9383

²⁰ CARE survey.