

# **Afghanistan's Presidential Election: Why It's a Problem That Karzai Is a Sure Bet to Win**

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The election in Afghanistan on Thursday will be watched closely around the world. It will be a critical moment for Afghanistan's future as well as for American efforts in that country. The election will be a test for the nascent Afghan state, the ability of American and other forces to maintain peace in the country, and for Afghan unity. It is also an election, at least at the presidential level, where the outcome is a foregone conclusion. It is almost certain that Afghan president Hamid Karzai will be reelected.

In this regard, the Afghan election is not dissimilar to recent elections around the world, even in countries with significantly different political systems. By November 2008, for example, there was little doubt in the U.S. that Obama would win the election. In Kyrgyzstan, earlier this summer, President Bakiev's reelection was all but guaranteed well before the first votes were cast. Obama's election surprised nobody because of the amount and sophistication of public opinion polling in the U.S., while Bakiev's reelection was a foregone conclusion because of the widespread use of government resources and intimidation in Kyrgyzstan. In many other democratic and semi-democratic countries, a single party dominates and wins most elections.

Recent elections in Kyrgyzstan, the U.S., and Afghanistan — countries that in many respects are very different — all shared this absence of uncertainty. Without uncertainty, elections, while still valuable, do not have the same impact. Uncertainty is a key component of healthy democracies. In democratic countries election outcomes are uncertain because voter preferences are uncertain and because voters can change their minds or get tired of incumbent politicians they once supported. This is why elections are held regularly in democracies. Similarly the constant negotiating, or deal-making as some would call it, is part of the uncertainty that characterizes democratic legislatures. Uncertainty is also a product of strong political competition which is both a symptom and a result of democracy.

Without uncertainty, and the conditions that produce uncertainty, elections at best become boring rituals and tests of state capacity. At worst, as in Kyrgyzstan, elections become exercises in the assertion of state power. Even in these best case scenarios, the danger that voters will lose confidence in elections, and democracy more broadly, because of the certainty surrounding election outcomes is real. The most compelling reason to vote in an election remains the possibility of changing the outcome. If the outcomes of both elections, and other political processes, for either fair or unfair reasons, is not viewed as in doubt, it will over time dampen voter enthusiasm and turnout, which will weaken democracy, particularly in transitioning countries like Afghanistan.

In a country like Afghanistan where the security environment is still rough and the future of the country, let alone its embryonic democracy, is still very much in doubt, it may seem petty to complain that the election is not sufficiently competitive. Clearly there could be, and are, far worse problems which Afghanistan faces going into this election, but presidential elections where incumbents win easily often are usually characterized by low-level fraud and liberal use of government resources, or worse. This is not a good foundation on which to develop sound political institutions. Therefore, if this lack of uncertainty persists it may, ironically, become a bigger problem should things begin to look better in Afghanistan.