

Afghanistan: How Much Election Fraud Is Okay?

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August 29, 2009

As allegations of election fraud, intimidation, violence and ballot stuffing in the recent Afghan elections increase it seems as if the election in Afghanistan is in that gray area where there was a fair amount of fraud, but it is not yet clear whether there was enough for it to have changed the outcome of the election. This puts the U.S. and other international actors in a complicated position. It is not uncommon in elections in semi-democratic, semi-authoritarian, post-conflict, or as in Afghanistan, mid-conflict countries for some amount of mid-level election fraud and misuse of resources to be discounted by international actors because “the voice of the people was heard”, or to phrase it less delicately “the guy who would’ve won (usually the incumbent), won anyway.”

While there is a certain logic to this approach it is not good for democratic development, can set bad precedents and often makes western countries look hypocritical. Outcomes of elections are important, but allowing for some fraud if it does not affect the outcome undermines popular confidence in elections and democracy more broadly. If citizens experience intimidation, see fraud occur and see it dismissed because it does not have a great effect on the outcome, a difficult to combat message that foreign powers are not so concerned with fairness or democracy is sent.

Of course, in some elections a moderate level of fraud can have a significant effect on the outcome of an election. Stealing, for example, 15% of the votes can give the winning candidate 75% rather than 60% of the vote, but it can also push an incumbent from 40%-55% of the vote, which is usually the difference between winning and losing. A concrete example from 2009 is that it is possible, although very difficult to know for certain, that the amount of fraud in Iran and Afghanistan in recent elections was comparable. In Afghanistan that fraud would have bolstered Karzai’s lead, but in Iran it would have been the difference between victory and defeat for Mahmoud Ahmedinejad.

Once some level of election fraud occurs, it reduces the confidence which anybody can feel in the outcome. Accordingly, allegations that Karzai stole this election, whether true or not, will likely hover over Karzai’s next term. For this reason, it is important for the international community to send unambiguous messages about election fraud whether or not it affects the outcome.

If the [recent meeting between Karzai and State Department Envoy Richard Holbrooke](#) is any indication, the U.S. is likely to take a tougher stance on election fraud of the sort in Afghanistan, where a candidate who is more or less an American ally bumps up his vote total through low and mid-level fraud. This would be a welcome development, but not fully address the problem.

The conundrum raised by the Afghan election, and others with a similar dynamic in the former Soviet Union, Middle East and elsewhere is difficult, but it speaks to the question of what we mean by democracy and its relation to state building. The recent election in Afghanistan may be good enough to determine who should be the president of that country, but has done little to move that country meaningfully towards democracy.