

Another Election in Afghanistan

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During the Vietnam War era one of the slogans of the anti-war movement was “What if they gave a war and nobody came?” Among the more popular riffs on that slogan, usually used to bemoan low voter turnout is “What if they gave an election and nobody came?” The election in Afghanistan last week raises a different question “What if they gave an election and it really wasn’t that important?” It is becoming evident that if and when Afghanistan makes meaningful steps towards democracy, elections will play a key role, but until that happens, elections may not be very central to Afghanistan’s development.

The observation that elections do not constitute democracy is pedantic and obvious, but this election in Afghanistan raises different issues. Clearly few people seriously believe that there is a meaningful relationship between democracy and elections in Afghanistan or that the latter can help bring about the former. This recently concluded election in Afghanistan was not a test of Afghan democracy, a significant chance for the people of Afghanistan to make real change in their country or a potential turning point for the country. It was, more accurately, another not quite major event in Afghanistan’s recent political that fits into broader narrative of conflict, development, peace and instability.

Part of the 21st century story of elections, democracy and democratic development is that elections, in many cases, simply are not that important. This is obvious with regards to many countries. It is reasonably unlikely that the next election in Azerbaijan, Belarus or Cambodia will bring any of those countries closer to democracy. Those countries may have a few elements of democracy, but in varying degrees, those elements are outweighed by the stronger authoritarian elements which an election is very unlikely to change.

Afghanistan is more complicated because it is less stable. This election is not quite just another election where the same non-democratic government will, through a combination of electoral shenanigans, intimidation and genuine popularity be reelected, nor is it a genuinely significant election pregnant with the possibility of democracy and change. It is somewhere in the middle. That is fitting because Afghanistan is somewhere in the middle as well. It is not yet a consolidated non-democratic regime where there is no real chance for democracy, nor is it any longer a post-conflict regime where the future is genuinely wide open.

If elections in Afghanistan have evolved into just another institution rife with fraud reflecting the corrupt and undemocratic nature of politics in that country, questions regarding the purpose of future electoral support to Afghanistan need to be addressed. One of these questions is how many elections, which range from not democratic to bad, should donor countries support and help conduct in Afghanistan. This question is more

acute in Afghanistan than, for example, Belarus or Cambodia, because of the major role played by international actors in conducting and funding these elections.

The answer is probably not to simply stop having elections in Afghanistan, because that would, in addition to abandoning the people of Afghanistan to an even worse fate, create additional problems of legitimacy and accountability. However, lowering expectations around elections, which is probably already happening, ensuring that elections are no longer focal points of assistance drawing attention, resources and energy away from other projects and finding ways to reduce the costs associated with elections will be necessary.