



# PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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## “Implications of the Final Election Results in Afghanistan for US Strategic Interests”

Middle East Institute

October 8, 2009. 12:00 – 2:00 pm

The Middle East Institute hosted a roundtable of leading Afghanistan experts to discuss the ongoing Afghan election audit process and the ramifications of this election on Afghan and Western perspectives. The event featured **Dr. William Maley**, Professor and Director of the Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy at the Australian National University and **Dr. Rani Mullen**, an Assistant Professor of Government at the College of William and Mary, where she is also a faculty participant in the Program on the Theory and Practice of International Politics. **Dr. Marvin Weinbaum**, a scholar-in-residence at the Middle East Institute with expertise in Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Terrorism, Political Economy, and Development, spoke and moderated the panel. All three members served as observers in Kabul during the August election.

Maley opened the meeting with a discussion of the deeper conceptual and institutional consequences from what they observed in the Afghan elections. Following the Russian withdrawal, the Afghan state had come to the point where mechanisms to legitimize the state, including the monarchy and the *mujihadeen*, had broken down and were not viable to be used to legitimize the election process set out in the 2003 constitution. Maley asserted there are key differences between the infant democracy in Afghanistan and the consolidated systems in the West. In the infant Afghan system, elections do not endow the candidate with ultimate governing legitimacy; instead, it is the successful process of governing that could have legitimized **President Karzai**. He noted that the election turnout was low, indicating large disillusionment or security concerns. Furthermore, if the fraud stands in this election, those who had confidence in the system will have reason to reconsider.

Probing further, he argued that the presidential system is overloaded with responsibilities that cannot possibly be fulfilled by one person. Another issue is that the office of the president is riddled with advisors, or “hangers on”, who are dependent on Karzai maintaining power and Maley felt these are the people most likely associated with the fraud. As such, reforming the Afghan constitution needs to be discussed in the West, because if the government is de-legitimized it will become the responsibility of Afghanistan’s friends to raise the point. It is also important not to lose sight of long-term goals and to question what kind of security force can be developed in Afghanistan if the government lacks legitimacy. Equally important, if the government is considered illegitimate, the Taliban will be bolstered and it will become harder to expect political change to be brought through legitimate means. Lastly, Maley warned if the U.S. does not act to ensure legitimacy, we will be seen by the Afghans as “un-indicted co-conspirators” of the fraud.

Mullen then provided a background on the collaboration of the three attendees and an update on the elections. In August, the three panelists were unable to see fraud in the relative safety of Kabul, but there were still real concerns. Only a third of the population voted, down from 70 percent, and the preliminary count showed Karzai with a 54% victory, the same margin he received five years before when he was much more popular. Allegations of fraud surfaced almost immediately. Now the EEC, composed of

three international members and two Afghans, has started to review fraudulent votes. The commission established audit criteria for reviewing any ballot box that held more than 600 votes or in which one candidate received 95% of the votes. Ten percent of the votes will be randomly distributed to six groups and will be audited. The EEC will release audit results along with results from fraud investigations. The percentage of fraudulent votes found for each candidate will be multiplied against his total number of votes to determine a final, legitimate vote count. Karzai will have to lose over 500,000 votes to fall below the 50% threshold needed to begin a recount.

There is tremendous pressure on the EEC to come to a quick resolution and they will have to deal with new U.N. data showing a substantially lower turnout than previously reported. Timing of a second election is an important concern in light of the coming winter and how to quickly reform the process to prevent a recurrence of fraud. At this point, she argued, it does not matter who or when the new government will be formed, as it is already severely tarnished, but the second round would at least show there is due process. Given the number of reports of fraud in the Afghan media, she asked what kind of message we would be sending if the international community did not insist on a legitimate process.

Weinbaum concluded by explaining that the international community had decided this round of elections was necessary to uphold its commitment to democracy, despite the threat that elections would destabilize the country and that Karzai had increased appointments among rival warlords. Weinbaum believed that Karzai would have won the election without fraud, despite the fact that two-thirds of the country was negative towards the regime, because his opponents were not viable national candidates. He noted that in a weak state, such as Afghanistan, elections were necessary because there is no confidence that another one would come around.

Initially after the elections, the U.S. had wanted to congratulate the country, accept the existence of some fraud, and hope that the process would be “good enough.” But the overwhelming allegations of fraud made that impossible. The U.S. did attempt to play the other card of building a unity government, but Weinbaum explained that another back-room deal would not be accepted by the people and Karzai had worked to undercut the minority vote by making deals to insure warlord support. The U.S. is now facing the great difficulty of building a counterinsurgency force among a population that is ambivalent to the central government. He recognized that the panel was in the minority by calling for a second round and he believed that Karzai could have been forced to salvage the election by clearing his cabinet of warlord-loyal appointees. Lastly, Weinbaum lamented that the Afghans have no reason to believe things will change over the next five years and that, if the U.S. mission narrows to rooting out *al Qaeda*, the Afghans will likely recalculate their decision to commit to good governance.

In the brief question and answer session, Maley explained that Afghan demographics had changed since the last elections, with a dramatic rise in access to radio and telecommunication, and he rejected the idea of finding an “acceptable dictator” because the Afghans will not stand for such a change. Weinbaum agreed and pointed to the weak dictatorial Afghan state that existed after the Russian pull-out. Finally, Mullen expressed concern that there is no international civilian strategy for building up the Afghan state. Maley believed that momentum for transition to democracy had been sucked out of the process and that the panel could not speak about the desire of the entire Afghan people. Weinbaum did say, however, that the Afghans, on the whole, do not want the civil war that a Taliban return would create they are not deeply engrossed in the election; and they do not want the international community to desert them. The question becomes, then, how can we provide a sense of basic security, better livelihoods, and just government.