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Afghanistan after the Elections: Implications and Strategies for Moving Forward

Allison Auditorium, The Heritage Foundation

12 p.m., Thursday August 27, 2009

The Heritage Foundation held an event analyzing last week's Afghan presidential and provincial council elections. The speakers on the panel were **Lt. Gen. (Ret.) David Barno** of the National Defense University, **Marvin Weinbaum** of the Middle East Institute, Afghanistan historian and analyst **David Isby** and Heritage's own **Lisa Curtis**. Senior Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs, **James Phillips** moderated.

Lt. Gen. Barno said that success in Afghanistan is essentially a mathematical equation *success = leadership + strategy + resources*. There has been a big change in all three variables in the last six months, as the mission in Afghanistan appeared to be courting failure at the beginning of the year. One of the main challenges he identified facing Afghanistan is how to rebuild trust between the Afghan people and the government. A lot of the optimism in the new government that was built after the start of the war has since waned. Only the Government of Afghanistan can deliver that result, and it will come down to the next president of Afghanistan. The people have no confidence in government, rule of law, or local government to fulfill their needs. The U.S. must assist this objective as a priority task; without faith in government, the whole effort in Afghanistan will fall apart. He noted that the Taliban's strategy is to "run out the clock". They see themselves as being in the fourth quarter, up on the scoreboard and now just holding on until the opposition (the U.S.) gives up. Overall, Barno argued that the effort is indeed achievable, particularly when compared to the 'unwinnable' security situation in Iraq three years ago.

Devoting his remarks "almost exclusively to the elections that took place on August 20, **Marvin Weinbaum** spoke about the double-edged sword of the electoral process, as it can both legitimate government but also damage democratic development. While strong states can recover from the partisan divisions of the campaign process, weak states are less able to do so. Where the 2004 presidential election bestowed legitimacy on **Hamid Karzai**, the same is not true for 2009. Everybody anticipated irregularities, but this election has meant that the opposition would certainly reject the result of the election no matter what. We went into the election expecting that it would be close, as Karzai has surrounded himself with a cohort designed to draw support away from the opposition.

There was good news from the election: the threat of major disruption by the Taliban did not materialize, particularly as Kabul did not exhibit the violence that many had feared. There was bad news, however, as although things went smoothly in Kabul, it became clear that there was a different sort of election happening in different areas of the country—where violent events occurred but news of the violence went unreported by the media so as not to discourage people from voting. He noted that this was due in large part to the nature of observation, whereby observers were not placed in highly dangerous election centers in areas like Helmand province. Weinbaum noted that the major concerns were not for 'retail' fraud (i.e. people washing ink off their fingers to vote again), but the 'wholesale' vote fraud of ballot box-stuffing, and vote manipulation. There is hard evidence of this type of fraud.

Still, the perpetrators of fraud may be tripped up by their own greediness, if results come in with much higher participation rates than the election-day estimates. The Independent Electoral Commission, which has the power to throw out any set of results from any station or province, could have a major impact on the conduct of the election.

The main consequence of the election for the U.S. is that we may be put in a position of being forced to work with a government that is widely believed to have been illegitimate. The international community is put in a difficult position as, having pressed for troops and resources to support the election, it is under pressure to proclaim the election a success. The Obama administration, along with the E.U., have left the people of Afghanistan thinking that we approve of the conduct of the election. As such, **the West is giving the impression that it supports the status quo.**

David Isby argued that the hard realities of politics underline two sets of facts: First, that the situation in Afghanistan is so serious and the implications so profound that even if all elements of current policy are successful, **Afghanistan cannot be “solved” in the next three years.** Second, Over the next three years, U.S. politics will have increasing potential to be effected by Afghanistan. The current administration will want to have the country in the rear-view mirror, as neither the Republicans, nor the liberal base will be very interested in pursuing the war at that time. The political corruption in Afghanistan is due to the fact that many Afghan elites believe that the day will come when the U.S. leaves and the ‘party’ will be over.

Lisa Curtis noted that the U.S. stakes in the Afghan election are very high. There have been some elements of the process that were successful, such as the advent of televised debates, which would not have occurred under the Taliban. Curtis sees two key questions going forward: First, was the turnout high enough to convince Afghans that the result was legitimate and reflects their communal will? Curtis noted that this will be up to the Afghans themselves to decide. Second, will due diligence be done on investigating the various electoral irregularities? Here, the international community can have a role, as it can work to ensure that the International Election Commission does a thorough job. Curtis also argued that setting timelines can have a very negative impact in the region, as it allows groups like the Taliban to convince their cadre that they can persevere, and undermines U.S. goals.

What has the Obama administration done right so far, and where might some course corrections be in order to improve U.S. Afghanistan policy? **Barno** said that the changes that the Obama administration has made have been completely spot on, particularly where it comes to making difficult changes in the leadership department. **Weinbaum** said that it is important to keep focused not on “victory,” but “success.” Still, he noted that the administration was initially off-track by couching the mission in terms of al-Qaeda and protecting the homeland, where it should have acknowledged our wide-ranging stakes in the region. The American public needs to know that the implications of failure are catastrophic, far beyond the issue of al-Qaeda. **Curtis** said that the Obama administration was correct to link Afghanistan and Pakistan, understanding that the threat spans the border, even though there are many differences between the two states.