



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

www.pomed.org ♦ 1820 Jefferson Place NW ♦ Washington, DC 20036

“The Struggle for a Democratic Future in Afghanistan: The 2010 Parliamentary Elections”

The Middle East Institute

1761 N St. NW

September 27, 2010, 12:00pm-1:00pm

On Monday, September 27th, the Middle East Institute held an event entitled “The Struggle for a Democratic Future in Afghanistan: The 2010 Parliamentary Elections.” **Kate Seelye**, Vice President of Programs and Communications for MEI, introduced the two speakers: **Marvin Weinbaum**, scholar at the Middle East Institute, and **Caroline Wadhams**, Director for South Asia Security Studies at the Center for American Progress. Both recently returned from trips to Afghanistan, where they were monitoring the recent elections. Seelye asked the speakers to discuss what they saw, as well as address the impact that the elections and their results might have for Afghanistan and for Washington’s engagement there.

In his remarks, Weinbaum asserted that the Afghan elections are important because they will have implications for U.S. efforts there, as well as for the future of democracy and governance in Afghanistan. He noted that the media has so far portrayed the elections as “far less than perfect,” and admitted that **the process was certainly “messy.”** He mentioned that there were cases of “wholesale fraud,” and pointed out that it will be impossible to know the true results of the elections for a few weeks. In addition, it remains unclear how the elections will affect the insurgency in Afghanistan. In general, assessing the broader impacts of the elections will depend on assessing the actual experiences of people and communities – that is, whether people’s experiences will turn them away from the democratic process or cause them to further embrace it.

Weinbaum asserted that one main difference between this election and last year’s presidential election is that while the previous election was for a single office (president), this election was essentially 34 different contests in 34 different provinces. Moreover, there were dozens or even hundreds of candidates in each province. As such, **this election really has 34 different stories, each depending on the ethnic makeup of a particular district or province.** This complexity also meant that election observers came away with a variety of views, all depending on location and circumstances.

In general, Weinbaum said, **the contests were dominated by local power brokers.** Not surprisingly, money and influence played a central role in each contest. What was absent in these elections, however, was a sort of national orchestration on the scale that was seen during **President Karzai’s** election last year. Admittedly, Karzai wants to see parliamentarians elected that will be deferential to the executive branch – however, Karzai could not control the vote on a national scale.

Regarding the actual election process, Weinbaum said that there was a 30-35% voter turnout. Many voting centers were closed down, and numerous complaints have been registered. Due, in part, to the sheer number of candidates that were running (about 4,500 candidates for about 200 seats in parliament), there were many unhappy people following the initial election results. On the positive

side, **Weinbaum said that he saw lots of young people participating in the process, as well as women.** the mood was very enthusiastic in places, and there was a wealth of campaign materials visible throughout the country. In addition, there was little violence in Kabul, despite pessimistic predictions to the contrary.

Caroline Wadhams opened her remarks with an anecdote of an interview that she conducted with a parliamentary candidate shortly before the election. The candidate's remarks suggested that he, and presumably other Afghans, were suspicious of U.S. activity in the country, and were not totally clear about where Washington's loyalties lie. Nevertheless, **the candidate was clear that he wanted the U.S. to stay in the country in order to observe the elections and promote stability.** In Wadhams' view, these comments are illustrative of the complexity of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan.

Wadhams described a "festive" atmosphere in Afghanistan on Election Day. However, there were also reports of fraud and irregularities, which contributed to a darkened mood following the elections. As an observer, she noted that it was difficult to assess the situation when she walked into a polling center, unsure of whether things were truly going smoothly or whether it was merely a performance for the observers' visits.

She agreed with Weinbaum's assessment that **the elections were essentially a consolidation of power by local leaders, rather than a process orchestrated at the national level.** Wadhams stated that it is still unclear what effect the increasing influence of local power brokers will have on governance in Afghanistan.

Following the prepared remarks by Weinbaum and Wadhams, several other election observers – who were present at the event – made a few comments about what they saw during the elections. One contended that the mood varied by region, and also pointed out that it was sometimes difficult for outside observers to get an accurate sense of the true integrity of some election locations. Another noted that it is widely agreed that the security situation in Afghanistan is deteriorating, and that the elections were largely characterized by "machine politics."

During the question-and-answer session, one audience member asked whether the candidates were running on issue-based platforms. The panelists responded that **it was largely a personality-driven election based on ethnic loyalties, rather than platforms.** Another audience member asked about how ordinary Afghans view their own narrative and their role in government – to this, Wadhams responded that most Afghans perceive themselves to be marginalized and unable to influence their leaders or institutions. The panelists also spoke about the mixed messages that they received from many Afghans: while people are not generally happy with the actions that the international community has taken in Afghanistan, they do not want the United States and others to exit the country. A few audience members expressed skepticism at the international election monitoring process, and one contended that democracy may mean different things in different contexts; in Afghanistan, for example, democracy should reflect the fact that local governance structures are often considered to be more important than large, centralized ones.

Overall, the speakers were able to use their personal experiences in the country to elucidate much about the election process itself as well as the implications that it might have for the future of Afghan governance and politics.