



# PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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## Prospects for Afghanistan's Future: Assessing the Outcome of the Afghan Presidential Election

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The Brookings Institution hosted the first discussion in Washington since the Afghan elections with **Bruce Riedel**, Senior Fellow at the Brookings Saban Center for Middle East Policy, **Michael O'Hanlon**, Director of Research at Brookings Foreign Policy program, **Kimberly Kagan**, from the Institute for the Study of War, and **Anthony Cordesman** from the Center for Strategic and International Studies. The event was moderated by Brookings' **Martin Indyki**.

**Michael O'Hanlon** began the discussion with an account of his experiences observing the Afghan elections. He surveyed what was good and bad about the poll, noting that the mechanics of how Election Day was conducted were good in most of the country: workers were prepared, organized and professional. Polling places were largely secured by security forces, despite several hundred attacks across the country. Before the election, the campaigns witnessed unprecedented engagement between Afghans and candidates. Live televised debates brought the issues and candidates directly to Afghans.

There were nevertheless negative aspects to the election, such as the overemphasis of **President Karzai** on state TV, insecurity and underwhelming enthusiasm from Afghans, which likely signals that their fragile optimism—recently been reported positive in the U.S.—may be on the decline. Therefore, this election may prove to be the last chance for NATO and US forces to begin anew in Afghanistan.

O'Hanlon concluded with two points: firstly, American support for Afghanistan is on the decline. He nevertheless praised the commitment and competencies of **General McChrystal**, who is aware that the U.S. is not currently winning the war, keenly understands the battlefield and can allay American concerns about the war. Secondly, O'Hanlon disagreed with **Admiral Mullen**'s statement last weekend claiming that the situation is continuing to worsen in Afghanistan.

**Bruce Riedel** began by saying that the first thing to recognize about the election is that it was a challenge for two contending sides: NATO/ISAF intended to facilitate a credible vote to rebuild government legitimacy and thus reverse Taliban momentum, while the Taliban planned to derail the vote. Government credibility is vital he said, "if the government goes into freefall, then all the troops in the world won't matter; there needs to be a functional government." The Taliban's efforts to mar the elections failed, he said. The insurgency is fully-Pashtun and this election demonstrates that it has not succeeded in mobilizing a national movement. Nevertheless, voting results from the north and west will shed light on the extent of the Taliban's actual influence.

Riedel used the 2005 election as a bar to measure the success of the 2009 poll, noting that in 2005 turnout was 40-49%, which can be used as the benchmark for measuring last week's election. Turnout in 2005 in some homogeneous non-Pashtun areas was high, but was strikingly low in Pashtun areas, signaling that Pashtuns were already disaffected with government. Moreover women comprised 9-14% of turnout in Pashtun areas in 2005 (at least 20% lower than male), which means that those watching Afghanistan closely should not be surprised if reports of low female participation emerge this election. The Pashtuns have not supported the U.S.-backed government since 2001, he said.

The support **Karzai** received from **Abdul Rashid Dostum** right before the election could lend him more votes, this has happened in previous elections. If there is a second round, however, there are rumors of a backroom power sharing deal between **Abdullah** and Karzai, which Riedel considers unlikely. Rather, a shift in alliances for the second round could change the political balance of power and thrust an unlikely winner to the presidency. Importantly, Riedel emphasized that a second round would reinforce the credibility of the victor and the consolidation of democracy in Afghanistan, proving that voting does matter. The result of a (currently hypothetical) second round could also provide NATO a last chance to demonstrate a commitment to Afghanistan. NATO and the U.S. cannot suggest to the government or Taliban any notion that their forces will be gone in a year or two, which would encourage the Taliban to bide its time and retake control.

**Anthony Cordesman** noted that to win this war, which it is on the road to failure, the U.S. operations increase transparency, honesty and resources in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, there has been very little coherence in U.S. strategy, civil-military planning, aid efficacy or Afghan security training. U.S. troop levels remain lower than they should be—or ever were in Iraq. The deterioration in control of territory and security to the Taliban has fairly caused **Ambassador Ikenberry** to request a doubling of resources for Iraq, he said.

It is necessary to finance a major expansion of Afghanistan security forces. Yet, there has been no transparent or honest reporting on the expansion of the Taliban threat, while the White House has pressured **McChrystal** and **Ikenberry** not to ask for more resources. We could lose this war, Cordesman said. Afghanistan is a reminder of failures in Vietnam, since focus is placed on tactical clashes with the Taliban rather than on increasing areas of enemy influence. “We are fighting a war half a century later that we lost for similar reasons half a century earlier,” he said.

In conclusion, Cordesman suggested, “If we are to win, we are going to have to create capabilities at the local and provincial levels that do not today exist.” This means reinforcing the civil side of military operations, which entails holding territory and building infrastructure, or risk alienating Afghans. But this will require money and resources.

**Kimberly Kagan** agreed with **Admiral Mullen**’s recent statement that the Afghan situation is deteriorating, given her experiences in the field with **General McChrystal** over the summer. There are, she noted, two major factors that distract military operations in Afghanistan. The first is fervent anti-westernism that leads to attacks on coalition efforts. The second is a competition for political power among internal Afghan enemy groups.

Attacks on coalition forces have distracted them from looking at the larger picture, she said. It took too long to notice that the Taliban, by providing basic government services, such as security and justice, is denying credibility to the Afghan government. Furthermore, a counterinsurgency strategy is not being pursued in Afghanistan; troops have not been deployed to areas where they can effectively clear and hold in order to build civilian development initiatives.

On the security level, Kagan emphasized that what was effective in Iraq, but is missing in Afghanistan, is the troop surge of indigenous army forces. For funding reasons, the U.S. has deliberately designed a limited Afghan force of just 90,000, which constrains its ability to secure the country. A surge in American troops, as planned by **President Obama** will likely yield higher reports of violence, but this cannot be interpreted as failure, she said, because the surges are taking place in Taliban strongholds, and will obviously meet resistance.

Success is not beyond reach in Afghanistan, but must take an entirely revamped strategic approach, she claimed, “we can succeed, but we have to implement the right strategy and resources.”