



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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

“What Next for Afghanistan? A Post-Election Analysis”

The Brookings Institution

Falk Auditorium, 1775 Massachusetts Ave.

October 18, 2010, 4:00pm-5:30pm

On Monday, October 18th, the Brookings Institution held an event called “What Next for Afghanistan? A Post-Election Analysis.” The panel was moderated by **Martin Indyk**, Vice President and Director of Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution. The panelists were **Thomas Garrett**, Vice President for Programs at the International Republican Institute; **Michael O’Hanlon**, Senior Fellow and Director of Research in Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution; **Vanda Felbab-Brown**, Fellow at the Brookings Institution; and **Gerard Russell**, Former Senior Political Adviser for Afghanistan. The group discussed the recent parliamentary elections in Afghanistan, focusing on polling irregularities, voter intimidation, tabulation errors, prospects for peace talks between **President Hamid Karzai** and Taliban leaders, and the future of the U.S. and NATO role in the country.

Thomas Garrett mentioned that he participated in election monitoring missions in the past four Afghan elections – this year, however, the IRI team was much larger and included 5 experts from the U.S. and 160 Afghan partners. Garrett said that although he could walk freely in the streets in 2004, **the security situation is considerably worse this year. Nevertheless, the country “is in a very good stage of democratic development.”** Unlike in previous years, there were women candidates, appearing on billboards and out in the community speaking with voters. Also noticeable this year was the large number of youths working in the polls, as well as an increased presence of candidate representatives in polling stations to serve as a check on the process. Moreover, Garrett asserted that **there is a greater diversity of candidates this year, with a variety of ethnic groups and age groups represented.**

When he spoke with voters, Garrett said that he found that people were keen to participate in the process. Although some doubt has been cast in the last few days on the election outcomes, the results should be evident soon. Regarding the allegations of fraud, **Garrett said that not all candidates had realistic expectations, and suggested that some have charged fraud out of frustration for having lost their race.**

Moving forward, he stressed that we need to look at governance and civil society. He noted that many Afghan organizations were disappointed in the dearth of foreign observer missions, and he said: “we need to redouble our commitment to civil society.”

Michael O’Hanlon, who also recently returned from an observer trip to Afghanistan, spoke next. **He witnessed “hopefulness in the air,” but said that there are still three main problems for the country.** First, there continues to be safe havens in Pakistan for Taliban leaders and other insurgents. Second, there is a great deal of corruption in Karzai’s inner circle. Third, the U.S. military presence in the country continues to embitter some actors in the country.

On a positive note, however, O'Hanlon observed that normal daily activity takes place in Kabul, and indicated that the security environment and economic indicators are both promising. The government has some good leaders, as well – the Minister of the Interior, for example, has a good vision for the police force and has worked to implement straightforward, sensible reforms. One reform has been a partnership program in which an Afghan security unit is paired with a NATO unit, and O'Hanlon stated that this is perhaps the single best reform during the U.S.' nine years in the country.

Vanda Felbab-Brown said that there are varying perceptions of the ground truth in Afghanistan. **Although the international community highlights the lack of car bombings and other improvements in the security situation, she asserted that local people will say that they are still scared of the Taliban and that they continue to feel insecure and disappointed with the direction of their county.** She also pointed out that there is still a lot of ethnic conflict, even in more stable areas.

Moreover, Felbab-Brown stated: **“it is striking how little legitimacy the government has.”** In recent months, even members of the government have sought to distance themselves from it. She acknowledged that there are more international resources coming into Afghanistan than ever before, but also contended that it is the highest level of resources likely to be achieved. She added that the corruption problem has still not been dealt with, and suggested that the issue needs to be dealt with at a national level.

At the moment, **Afghans are clamoring for a strongman, according to Felbab-Brown.** She added: “I don't think the situation is going well,” and that the consequences for failing are huge. **For now, the international community seems to be trying to mitigate the damage, rather than make real progress.** Moving forward, she said that we should focus on concentrating resources in key areas – rather than send more money into the country, problems like corruption and ethnic tensions need to be tackled effectively.

Lastly, **Gerard Russell** outlined two scenarios for the future of Afghanistan. **In one scenario, Taliban leaders could come to Kabul and take part – to a point – in the political process.** He pointed out that this has happened somewhat in the past, and that it is possible again in the future. He noted, however, that even if a few important Taliban leaders are brought into the political process, it will not seriously weaken the insurgency.

In a second and more dramatic scenario, Russell envisioned some sort of grand bargain between the Taliban and the Afghan government. This would entail full reconciliation, which admittedly does not look likely in the near future, in large part because the Taliban does not feel that it is losing the conflict right now. In the long run, however, this scenario is not inconceivable – to make it possible, we need to focus on building a strong infrastructure and more trustful relations between the two parties, Russell said.

During the question-and-answer session, Russell stressed the importance of Pakistan in the future of the Afghan state. Currently, Pakistan has sanctuaries for Taliban leaders and can act as a sort of puppet master, controlling some Taliban decision-making. As such, **it will be tricky to involve Pakistan in negotiations between Taliban leaders and Afghan government officials without letting Pakistan determine the outcome.** It was also mentioned that the continued U.S. and NATO military presence could help bring the Taliban to the table.