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Afghanistan: Elections, Constitution, and Government

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Summary

In 2004 and 2005, Afghanistan adopted a permanent constitution and elected a president and a parliament. The parliament is emerging as a significant force in Afghan politics, as shown in debate over a new cabinet proposed in March 2006. However, insurgent violence continues to threaten Afghan stability. See CRS Report RL30588, *Afghanistan: Post-War Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman.

Post-Conflict Political Transition

Afghanistan has not previously had a fully elected government, although there were parliamentary elections during the reign of King Zahir Shah, the last of which was in 1969. Presidential, parliamentary, and provincial elections, and adoption of a constitution were part of a post-Taliban transition roadmap established by a United Nations-sponsored agreement of major Afghan factions signed in Bonn, Germany on December 5, 2001, after the Taliban had fled Kabul (“Bonn Agreement”).¹ The Bonn meeting formed an interim administration, led by Hamid Karzai, an ethnic Pashtun leader. Subsequently, a new constitution was approved at a “constitutional loya jirga,” or traditional Afghan assembly in January 2004. The constitution sets up a strong elected presidency, but, at the urging of Karzai’s minority-dominated “Northern Alliance” faction, it gave substantial powers to an elected parliament, such as veto power over cabinet nominees. The constitution provided for the following.²

- Presidential elections (held by June 2004). Two vice presidents run on the same election ticket as the president, and one succeeds him in the event of the president’s death. They serve a five-year term, and presidents are limited to two terms.

¹ For text, see [<http://www.un.org/News/dh/latest/afghan/afghan-agree.htm>].

² Text of constitution, see [<http://www.afghan-web.com/politics/currentconstitutionenglish.pdf>].

- A parliament of (1) a 249-seat lower house (*Wolesi Jirga*, House of People), to be elected simultaneously, *if possible*, with presidential elections. Of those, ten seats are reserved for Afghanistan's *Kuchis* (nomads); and (2) a 102-seat selected upper house (*Meshrano Jirga*, House of Elders). Of the 102 seats: 34 are selected by provincial councils (one from each of the 34 provincial councils); another 34 are selected by nearly 400 district councils; and the final 34 are appointed by the President. The provincial and district councils were to be elected, simultaneously, *if possible*, with the other elections. No major roles are stipulated for the provincial or district councils, although they are likely to gain powers to impose local taxes and provide local services.
- In the lower house, at least 68 of those elected (two per province x 34 provinces) "should" be women, giving women about 25% of the seats. The top two women vote-getters in each province earn seats. In the upper house, half of the president's 34 appointees are to be women.
- The constitution states that "no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam," and says that men and women have "equal rights and duties before the law." Political parties can be established so long as their charters "do not contradict the principles of Islam," and they do not have affiliations with other countries.
- The constitution does not impose Islamic law but provides for court rulings "in accord with [the Hanafi school of] Islamic law," when there is no specific provision in the Constitution or other laws on that issue.

The October 2004 Presidential Election

Karzai sought to hold presidential elections by the June 2004 deadline to demonstrate that he did not seek to monopolize power. However, there was an early recognition that parliamentary, provincial, and district elections are complicated to organize and could not be held simultaneous with presidential elections. In July 2003, a joint Afghan-U.N. (U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, UNAMA), elections management body, called the Joint Election Management Body (JEMB), was set up. Even though a population census had never been taken, it was estimated that there would be 10.5 million eligible voters. The voting age is 18. Registration was slowed by violence in early 2004, and holding to the June 2004 schedule was judged not feasible, but a firm presidential election date was set for October 9, 2004. The parliamentary, provincial, and district elections were postponed (initially to April-May 2005). A total of 10.5 million voters registered,³ of which about 42% were women. On May 25, 2004, Karzai signed an election law⁴ providing for district-based (voting for specific candidates) rather than proportional representation (voting for party slates).

³ The International Organization of Migration, on behalf of the JEMB, conducted registration of Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan, who were eligible to vote.

⁴ "New Afghan Election Law Endorsed." Kabul Radio in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, May 27, 2004.

In advance of the vote, Karzai engaged in substantial political bargaining to try to blunt opposition. Northern Alliance leaders, including former President Burhannuddin Rabbani (the Alliance political leader) and Defense Minister Mohammad Fahim, sought to trade support for Karzai for a future role in a coalition cabinet. Instead, Karzai chose as his running mate Ahmad Zia Masud, brother of legendary slain Alliance commander Ahmad Shah Masud, hoping to attract Tajik support. His second running mate was Hazara community (Shiite Muslims) leader Karim Khalili. The Northern Alliance fielded Education Minister Yunis Qanooni, who instantly became the most serious challenger. Also running was Uzbek leader Abdul Rashid Dostam, who has been part of the Northern Alliance. Aside from the above, 15 other candidates were certified to run, including Hazara leader Mohammad Mohaqiq and Dr. Masooda Jalal, the only woman who ran.

To secure the vote, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the 37-nation NATO-led peacekeeping force, was reinforced by 2,500 troops, bringing its total force to 9,000. The U.S.-trained Afghan National Army (ANA), which had 15,000 at election time and now has about 29,000, performed election security missions, along with the Afghan national police (about 50,000 nationwide). Several hundred additional U.S. troops reinforced the 18,000 U.S. forces already there. On election day, there were a few minor insurgent attacks during the voting — far fewer than expected. Voter turnout was heavy at about 80% (8 million votes cast). Fears of widespread voter intimidation by factional militias were generally not realized. The vote was observed by about 400 international monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and other groups, who mostly rebuffed allegations by 15 challenging candidates that there had been widespread fraud, including alleged failure of indelible ink to prevent multiple voting. International donors, including the United States, provided more than \$90 million in aid for the presidential elections. An FY2004 supplemental appropriation (H.Rept. 108-337, P.L. 108-106) provided \$69 million for “elections and governance.”

Results. Karzai was declared the winner on November 3, 2004. He received about 4.4 million votes (55.4%), more than the 50% needed to avoid a runoff. Qanooni was second with 1.3 million (16.3%); Mohaqiq, 935,000 (11.7%); Dostam, 800,000 (10%); and Masooda Jalal, 91,000 (1.1%). Karzai was sworn into a five-year term on December 7, 2004, with Vice President Cheney in attendance. On December 23, 2004, he announced a 27-seat cabinet that tilted somewhat more than his previous administration toward Pashtuns, particularly in the key security ministries. Most notably, Fahim was replaced as Defense Minister by his Pashtun deputy, Abdul Rahim Wardak, and Qanooni was not given a cabinet seat. To emphasize a commitment to counter-narcotics, Karzai appointed a new Minister of Counter-Narcotics, Habibullah Qaderi.

Parliamentary and Provincial Elections/New Parliament

On March 21, 2005, the Afghan Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) announced that parliamentary and provincial elections would be held on September 18, 2005. District elections were postponed until some time in 2006 (no date is yet scheduled) because of the complexities of drawing district boundaries. This postponement meant that these councils would not select their representatives to the upper house (Meshrano Jirga). In the interim, the 34 provincial councils would select *two* representatives — one permanent (full four-year term) and one interim, with each interim member to be replaced by a district council selectee when these councils are elected.

The election system was the “Single Non-Transferable Vote System” (SNTV) in which candidates stand as individuals, not as members of a party list. Each voter cast a ballot for only one candidate for the lower house, even though there were multiple representatives per province — the number varying from 2 (Panjsher province) to 33 (Kabul province). Herat province has 17 representatives; Nangahar, 14; Qandahar, Balkh, and Ghazni, 11 seats each. Each of the 34 provincial councils consists of between 9 and 29 seats (Kabul province is largest with 29). Some experts had urged that the parliamentary election be conducted by proportional representation because there would be less potential for local manipulation. That system was not adopted because of the fears of empowering political parties, which are unpopular in Afghanistan because of the *mujahedin* parties’ links to foreign governments during the anti-Soviet war. Even though the vote was not party-based, 70 parties are registered with the Ministry of Justice.

There were a total of 2,815 candidates (including 347 women) for the lower house and 3,185 candidates (including 279 women) for the provincial councils. Out of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces, three (Nangahar, Uruzgan, and Zabol) did not have enough female candidates for the provincial elections to ensure at least 25% female representation; these seats remain vacant until the next election. During June 25-July 21, over 2 million additional voters registered (those who came of age since the presidential election or were not originally counted), bringing the total to about 12.5 million. The OSCE and the European Union sent observer missions. An Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) initially disqualified 208 candidates for alleged ties to illegal militias; some disarmed, others withdrew their candidacies. A final list of candidates was published on July 12, with only 11 disqualified, although another 28 were later disqualified, mostly for alleged links to armed groups. The September 2005 elections cost about \$159 million, all of which came from international donors. The United States contributed about \$40 million (from FY2004 and FY2005 supplemental appropriations, P.L. 108-106 and P.L. 109-13).

Prior to the election, observers feared that stepped up Taliban insurgent violence in Afghanistan could disrupt the elections, even though Taliban “spokespersons” said polling places would not be targeted. Seven candidates and four election workers were killed before the election (and one after). Other experts perceived the main threat to the election as local militia leaders and narcotics traffickers who might try to influence the voting. Security measures were similar to those put in place for the presidential elections; the Afghan national police and the ANA took the lead in guarding the 6,200 polling centers, with U.S. and international forces ready to assist. No major attacks on polling centers were reported during the vote, although about 15 people were killed in election day violence (including a French soldier). However, turnout was lower than expected — about 57% (about 6.8 million voters), which observers tended to attribute to voter confusion over the large numbers of candidates on each ballot and high voter illiteracy, even though candidates were identified on the ballot with symbols and photographs. Observers did express concerns about apparent fraud (mostly proxy voting in some districts), and JEMB investigations of balloting complaints delayed publication of final results until November 12, 2005.⁵

⁵ Results are available at [<http://www.jemb.org/>].

Results and New Parliament.⁶ The results largely confirmed expectations that many seats would go to prominent national and local personalities and factional groupings. Although Karzai himself did not form a party, observers say that Karzai supporters are about 60% of the parliament. Among the pro-Karzai parliamentarians is his elder brother, Qayyum (Qandahar Province). About 40 parliamentarians are from the Hizb-e-Islam party of anti-U.S. former *mujahedin* leader Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, but they have renounced violence and are said to support Karzai.

An “opposition” bloc is the 14-party, pro-Northern Alliance “National Understanding Front,” led by Yunus Qanooni and former president Rabbani. Qanooni, who is believed to be positioning himself for another presidential run, won a lower house seat from Kabul province and was selected lower house Speaker on December 21, 2005. Both Qanooni and Rabbani say they want to work cooperatively with Karzai’s government, but they appear to have assembled a formidable parliamentary bloc. They engineered Qanooni’s selection as speaker, beating back a challenge from Abd-i-Rab Rasul Sayyaf (Kabul Province), a prominent *mujahedin* party leader and Islamic conservative who was backed by Karzai for the speakership. Two deputy lower house speakers were selected on December 22: the first deputy is Aref Nurzai (a relative by marriage to the Karzai clan); the other is Kawzia Kofi, a Tajik woman from Rabbani’s home province (Badakhshan).

Introducing further texture to the parliament is the presence of reputed militia leaders, former officials of the Communist regime that led Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation, and Taliban era figures who renounced violence. The feared Soviet-era Interior Minister, Sayed Muhammad Gulabzoi, won a seat from Khost Province. Shanawaz Tanai, the Soviet-era Defense Minister, was not elected. Of the former Taliban figures, Abdul Salam Rocketi (“Mullah Rocketi”), won from Zabol province, and Mohammad Islam Mohammadi, who ran Bamiyan Province during the Taliban rule and who cooperated with the Taliban’s destruction of the large Buddha statues in Bamiyan in early 2001, won from Samangan province. Some accounts say that at least another six elected members were Taliban officials or military commanders. The Taliban-era Foreign Minister Wakil Mutawwakil lost, as did the former enforcer of the Taliban’s puritanical restrictions, Maulvi Qalamuddin. Another reputed militia leader who won a seat is Hazrat Ali (Nangarhar Province), who had gained fame for directing the Afghan component of the assault on the Al Qaeda redoubt in the Tora Bora mountains during the U.S.-led war. Another elected member is Pacha Khan Zadran, a local leader from Paktia Province who, by some accounts, helped Osama bin Laden escape from Tora Bora during the U.S. offensive there. However, a prevailing view in Kabul is that all faction leaders are now committed to peaceful debate in parliament rather than violence.

A number of unaffiliated, well-educated Afghans also won, including several prominent women. They include 27-year-old Malalai Joya (Farah Province), an outspoken women’s rights advocate who is emerging as a leading government critic in the new parliament. Other prominent women who won are Fauzia Gailani, who came in first in conservative Herat Province, and Shukria Barekzai, editor of *Woman Mirror* magazine. One of the few intellectuals elected was Ramazan Bashardost, a male former Karzai

⁶ Some of the information in this section is taken from author participation in a House Democracy Assistance Commission assessment visit to Afghanistan during February 26-March 2, 2006.

government minister who is emerging as a major champion of constitutional procedure and parliamentary prerogatives. The U.S.-based International Republican Institute (IRI) is working to organize and train the estimated 93 lower house “independents; “ the National Democratic Institute (NDI) is assisting the larger, organized factions.

In the upper house, Karzai has fewer critics. After making his 34 appointments to that body (including the mandated 17 women), he engineered the appointment of an ally, Sibghatullah Mojadeddi (who heads a reconciliation and amnesty commission) as its Speaker. Mojadeddi defeated a university chancellor, Bakhtar Aminzay, for that post. Karzai also appointed Fahim (see above) to the body, representing a further effort to coopt the Northern Alliance leaders; as well as reputed drug trafficker Sher Mohammad Akhund, the governor of Helmand Province; and former Taliban religious affairs deputy minister Arsala Rahmani. The deputy speaker is Hamid Gaylani, a generally pro-Karzai family that has five members in the parliament (both houses).

After a one-week training session, both houses were inaugurated on December 19, with Vice President Cheney attending. Assisting the members is a staff of about 275 Afghans, reporting to a parliament “secretariat.” Staff was hired a year before parliament convened, and they and the members are receiving assistance and training from the U.N. Development Program and the State University of New York (SUNY) under an \$8 million contract with USAID. It has formed 18 committees to oversee governmental functions; each committee has two staff members. The parliament has a small research group and a relatively small library. The parliament’s budget is controlled by the government (Ministry of Finance).

Parliament-Executive Relations and Implications. The completion of the series of elections (with the exception of the district councils) is considered a major milestone that has given the Afghan government additional strength and legitimacy. On the other hand, the new parliament has already begun to slow government decision-making and cause Karzai to proceed somewhat more cautiously in his close relationship with the United States. Immediately after it was seated, parliament called for the dismantling of (mostly U.S.-run) “security barriers” in Kabul.

Subsequently (February 2006), the Qanooni/Rabbani grouping achieved a parliament vote to review Karzai’s cabinet individually, rather than *en bloc*, significantly increasing their leverage over Karzai’s nominees. That perceived defeat prompted some to argue that Karzai needs to develop a party structure to better organize his supporters. However, Karzai rallied his followers in the confirmation process; only five of his 25 cabinet nominees (announced March 22, 2006) were rejected, fewer than expected. (Three ministers were declared confirmed after receiving plurality votes.) Among those confirmed was Dr. Rangeen Dadfar Spanta, replacing the well known Northern Alliance figure Dr. Abdullah. Karzai’s one female nominee as well as his proposed culture minister who had allowed distribution of Western-oriented films in Afghanistan were rejected due to opposition from parliament conservatives. The other three rejected were the ministers of economy (a Karzai ally, rejected for perceived poor performance); of commerce; and of transportation.