# Election crisis: The problem is the system

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The election crisis in Afghanistan, now mercifully behind us, was bizarre from start to finish. President Hamaid Karzai – accused of gross corruption and election fraud – was declared the winner by his own election commission while congratulations poured in from western capitals and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon flew in for a personal visit. Yet the legacy of the crisis remains.

The problem runs much deeper than just an imperfect election or corruption. It is not so much that Karzai has cheated on a grand scale, but that under intense international pressure the country has introduced a political system which is poorly suited to a deeply divided society. Calls for a run-off election because the sitting president ended up with only 49.67 % of the vote, and not one-tenth over 50 %, was perceived as rather surrealistic by many Afghans for whom legitimacy has other sources.

Holding a democratic election in a country that has entered a new phase of a 30-year war is in itself problematic. Challenges related to logistics, security, voter information, corruption and election monitoring resulted in a voter turn-out rate in August ranging from 5 to 30 percent. The security situation in the south made it especially difficult for many people to vote. These were primarily supporters of Karzai, and the situation almost called for cheating.

But the main cause of the crisis is that Afghanistan is a purely presidential system and not a system with a solid component of parliamentarianism. This discussion emerged already in 2001, and was a common theme when the constitution was being drawn up in 2003-4. The argument was that a parliamentary system is more inclusive and therefore better suited for a society with strong ethnic and religious divisions. Since then, the country’s minority groups – Uzbeks, Tajiks, Hazaras and others, which altogether comprise about 60 percent of the population – have increasingly voiced demands for a more inclusive system. They have proposed, for instance, that a prime ministerial post based in the parliament be established and that an election of local governors be held to ensure the political decentralisation of power and a better representation of the country’s diverse population.

This conflict simmered beneath the surface of the last election crisis. Karzai’s opponent, Abdullah Abdullah, receives most of his support from the minority groups. He has close ties to the Northern Alliance led by the Tajiks, which gained substantial power for some time following the 2001 intervention. Karzai, on the other hand, represents the Pashtuns, which comprise the largest ethnic group and have traditionally governed the country. Although Karzai has forged tactical alliances with minority representatives, he is primarily perceived to be a Pashtun and a spokesman for their interests.

Ethnic divisions have been a longstanding feature of Afghan politics and have contributed to the country’s prolonged conflicts. In spite of this, the constitution of 2004 consolidated all power in the office of the president. The reason was two-fold. As the largest ethnic group from which Afghan kings or presidents have been drawn, the Pashtuns wanted to retain their historical position of power. International stakeholders, especially the United States, sought a weak parliament to ensure a strong president who could effectively cooperate in the “war against terror”. The role of the parliament was subsequently weakened even further, when the election law did not allow candidates to run for office on party lists but only as individuals. This development was also in response to US pressure and Karzai’s wishes.

Naturally, the result was an intense struggle over the office of the president: the candidate who managed to secure more than 50 percent of the vote would win the entire political pot. This corresponds poorly with the traditional Afghan political culture, which is based on the ability and desire to negotiate with a number of shifting alliances that eventually leads to a compromise. The current speculation about a coalition government is deeply rooted in this culture. The same is true for the possibility of convening an extraordinary national assembly – the traditional *loya jirga* – which historically has offered a way out of difficult dilemmas. It is a process that can generate consensus and uphold the honour and standing of all the parties involved. The result is not winners and losers decided by tenths of points, but an elaborate barter in which both the seller and buyer can claim they have done well.

The other fundamental problem underlying the crisis in Afghanistan is the lack of legitimacy of the Afghan state and the democracy that international stakeholders have invested billions of dollars and sacrificed the lives of thousands of soldiers to build. A vast majority of the Afghan people have found that the state has done little to realize the development, rights or the security they were promised in 2001. The problem of legitimacy also has deeper roots.

Ideologically speaking, Islam is the most important source of legitimacy for the Afghan state. Throughout modern history, the Afghan state has been built and strengthened in the name of Islam as well as nationalism as leaders united their people against external threats. In earlier periods these threats came from the British Empire, which expanded from India, and from the Pan-Slavic movement in the north. Later Afghan nation-builders, notably Daoud Khan, mobilised against Pakistan, partly in the form of a demand for the recognition of “Pashtunistan”. Under the communist regime at the end of the 1970s and following the Soviet invasion, both nationalism and Islam gave legitimising power to the broad-based resistance movement of the *mujahideen.* The Taliban uses Islam and nationalism in the same way today to mobilise against the international presence. President Karzai, himself, has increasingly played on nationalist ideology by criticising the international forces when large civilian casualties occur.

Against this backdrop, the photo from Karzai’s press conference when he announced the re-election was most unfortunate. Standing behind Karzai was the UN SRSG and next to him a US senator. The photo caption was clear: an Afghan leader was being conferred the title of statesman because he allowed himself to be coerced into the fold of the international stakeholders. The challenger, Abdullah Abdullah, later received a similar distinction when he decided to withdraw from the race. This carves deep crevices in the mountain of legitimacy that a viable Afghan state – and leader – needs.

Overall, the election farce shows that it is not primarily the individuals involved in the power game that have come up short, even though few of them have demonstrated great statesmanship or diplomatic skill. The problem, rather, is the rules of the game. itself. Stability and progress in Afghanistan requires first and foremost a more inclusive political system that resonates more deeply with the traditional political culture and its institutions.