

HIGH URBAN TURNOUT, NO MAJOR VIOLENCE, BUT HOW SUCCESSFUL WAS AFGHAN ELECTION?

With no catastrophic attacks taking place and reports of over 7 million people voting, on first impressions it would appear that Afghanistan's presidential election on Saturday was a resounding success. Digging a bit deeper, though, reveals disturbing evidence of hundreds of violent incidents that received little attention and large areas of the country where the electorate was too scared of the Taliban to vote. Another large cautionary note is that the slow rate of vote counting means that it will be a long time before there can be any meaningful analysis of the extent of vote-stuffing. Further, the US goal of a new president clearing the way to a signed Bilateral Security Agreement is likely to be put off further, as any runoff will not happen until late May, which could well be past the point at which the US will have to decide if it will invoke the zero option and withdraw all troops from the country at the end of the year.

The New York Times gives us the rosy version of the voting:

After enduring months of Taliban attacks and days of security clampdowns, Afghans reveled Sunday in the apparent success of the weekend's presidential election, as officials offered the first solid indications that the vote had far exceeded expectations.

Two senior officials from the Independent Election Commission said the authorities supervising the collection of ballots in tallying centers had counted between seven million and 7.5 million total ballots, indicating that

about 60 percent of the 12 million eligible voters had taken part in the election. The officials spoke on the condition of anonymity because results will not be released for weeks.

Even this report, though, cautions that fraud could still be a problem and will take time to detect:

Afghan election observers backed up the numbers offered by election officials, as did Western diplomats, though the latter struck a more cautious tone. But both said that some votes would invariably be thrown out because of fraud.

The question was how many, and whether Afghanistan would see a repeat of the 2009 election, which was marred by widespread ballot stuffing and other fraud. Turnout that year was about 38 percent, though some estimates put it lower. The memory of what happened that year still hovers here, giving many reason to hesitate before declaring this weekend's vote an unqualified success.

It took days for the full extent of the problems with the 2009 election to emerge, and the ensuing political crisis lasted months, souring relations between President Karzai and the United States, embittering many Afghans and helping fuel a Taliban insurgency that was gaining momentum.

But the claims of no large attacks overshadowed the news that there were actually hundreds of attacks aimed at the voting:

The anti-government armed militants carried out 690 attacks across the country during the presidential and provincial council elections on Saturday.

Defense ministry spokesman, Gen. Zahir Azimi said Saturday that the attacks by militants included direct fire, rocket attacks, improvised explosive device (IED) attacks and suicide attacks.

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Azimi also added that 164 militants were killed and 82 others were injured during the attacks while Afghan army soldiers seized various types of weapons belonging to the assailant militants.

He said at least 7 Afghan national army soldiers were martyred and 45 others were injured during these attacks.

That Khaama Press account did not cite figures on civilian deaths or injuries, but this Reuters article does note some civilian deaths:

During Saturday's election, there were dozens of reports of minor roadside bombs, attacks on polling stations, police and voters. In the eastern province of Kunar alone, two voters died and 14 were wounded, while 14 Taliban militants were killed.

Interior Minister Umer Daudzai said nine policemen, seven soldiers, 89 Taliban fighters were killed in the past 24 hours across the country, adding that four civilians were also killed.

The Khaama Press article above noted that 211 polling places were closed because the areas were deemed too violent, while 6212 remained open. If the reported 690 attacks were spread evenly, that would mean that more than ten percent of polling places were attacked in one way or another. Of course, those attacks would not have been spread evenly, as some areas are much more subject to Taliban control and intimidation. Today's Washington Post brings us information on some of those areas and how

voters responded:

They were the only voters at a polling station here, and Taliban gunfire could be heard from the voting booth.

But before they cast their ballots for Afghanistan's next president, the three men had a request. They did not want to dip their fingers in ink – the process used here to identify voters and keep them from casting more than one ballot.

"If the Taliban sees our fingers, they will kill us," Abdul Balkhi told the employees of the election commission. "During the night they will come to our house, and what will I say?"

The article continues:

Across Wardak province, where Nerkh is located, rural polling sites were mostly empty Saturday. And although the day was not as violent as many expected, the Taliban appeared to have succeeded in intimidating voters before polls opened.

For Afghan soldiers who had spent months on a plan to secure the elections – the largest operation in the history of the military – it was an infuriating conclusion. They had managed to protect more than 100 polling sites in Wardak, but in many villages, guards outnumbered voters.

"We did our best to secure the election, but the people don't want to vote," Sgt. Ajab Khan said.

It would appear that one day of security is not enough to get people in the outlying areas to vote. And as if that isn't discouraging enough, it appears that voting very likely went along ethnic lines, setting the stage for extreme difficulty in putting the next government together. And don't forget that the likely

leading candidate had as his running mate Rashid Dostum, the perpetrator of one of the most heinous war crimes in recent history. For now, I think I will hold off on congratulating Afghanistan for any great accomplishment.