

AFGHANISTAN STAGGERS TOWARD ELECTION

Saturday will mark the first time Afghanistan has gone to the polls to choose a new president since the US overthrew the Taliban and put Hamid Karzai in charge. This will hardly be an accomplishment to herald in the US press, although I am sure the military will attempt to get major outlets to tout it as so after the fact. In fact, even the rosy “look what has been accomplished in Afghanistan” fluff piece published today in Khaama Press cites a paltry list of accomplishments, such as 50 television stations and not quite half a million Afghans on Facebook. Tellingly, though, a closer look reveals that the piece is attributed to Dr. Florance Ebrahimi. It turns out that even though she is originally from Kabul, she practices in Sydney. And why shouldn't she? Afghanistan is tied with North Korea and Somalia at the very bottom of the list when countries are ranked for their level of corruption. And it appears that even before the election takes place, ten percent of the planned polling stations have been closed due to security concerns. And what of the candidates? The top three are profiled here by the New York Times. All three of the leaders have already pledged to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement, keeping US troops in Afghanistan beyond the end of this year—and thus assuring the maximal continuing flow of US funds to fuel even more corruption. The candidates are noteworthy to me only in that two of them have running mates that would rival Dick Cheney as the most notorious war criminal to be Vice President of a country in the past 15 years.

Today's New York Times piece cited above on the closure of polling places due to anticipated violence is devastating. For example:

█ One of the few polling centers in this

part of Logar Province is the government's district headquarters, a building so devastated by rocket attacks and Taliban gunfire that it looks more like a bomb shelter than an administrative office.

As the body count for security forces has risen over the past few days in this embattled district, a stretch of dusty farmland surrounded by mountains, it has become clear that no one here is going to vote on Saturday, either for president or for provincial council delegates.

So far, that has not stopped security officials from proclaiming the district open for voting: It is not among the roughly 10 percent of 7,500 total national sites shut down as too dangerous to protect. The Charkh district center has been pumped full of security forces to keep the vote a nominal possibility, but residents know that within a day or two after the elections, the guards will be gone and the Taliban will remain.

"The government has no meaning here," said Khalilullah Kamal, the district governor, who was shot two times in the stomach a few months back while speaking in a mosque. "If there is no expectation that we will arrest people who break the law, then how do we expect the people to come and vote?"

Think about that. The polling place in this passage looks like a bomb shelter and life has gotten so violent there that it is clear nobody will vote there Saturday. And yet this site isn't included among the 10 percent of sites that won't be open Saturday. Further, "government has no meaning here" reflects the utter failure of US efforts to establish a unified government in Afghanistan. But does that

apply only to a small area? Hardly. Consider that the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction stated back in October that it is likely that no more than 21 percent of Afghanistan will be accessible to SIGAR (pdf) to carry out oversight functions (and the State Department warned them that the 21 percent figure may be overly optimistic) by the end of this year.

Since the US has already formally handed over security operations to the Afghans, what are they doing to make the election safe? On Tuesday they announced that 60,000 "fresh" (I presume this means newly trained? How well were they screened?) Afghan National Army troops were deployed across the country for election security. Then, on Wednesday, the figure was increased to 195,000 total security personnel when ANA figures were joined with security personnel from the Afghan National Police and the National Directorate of Security. That's quite a force. So for roughly 7500 polling stations, that gives about 26 security personnel guarding each site if they are distributed evenly. Oh, and to protect Westerners before the election, places where they tend to gather have been closed.

Whatever the outcome on Saturday, I see little reason to be optimistic that there will be any improvement in living conditions for the average Afghan citizen.