

Afghan elections: Ballot shortage, calm before the storm

*By: Zabihullah Noori*

More than 7 million Afghans, one third of whom are women, cast their votes during the 5 April 2014 presidential and provincial councils elections. Afghans flocked to the polling stations and cast their votes, despite a series of serious disruption threats from the Taliban and terrorists; however, a shortage of ballot papers in several provinces disappointed those voters who went to the polling stations just to find out that they could not cast their votes.

The turnout of voters on a relatively cold and rainy day was a clear indication of their desire for change and their support for the democratic process in the transfer of power from one elected president to the next. This was a historic day for Afghanistan, as it was the first time in the country's history that the transition of power could take place without any coup or bloodshed.

Just days before the election, the Taliban attacked several key locations including site offices and the headquarters of the Independent Electoral Commission in the country's capital Kabul, killing people and causing chaos. But the Afghans' determination showed that they value democracy even at the cost of their lives.

Apart from security threats, the biggest worry that most Afghans, particularly the runners in the race had, was fraud and interference by the government in the Independent Electoral Commission's (IEC) affairs. During the electoral campaign period, different government opposition political parties and runners in the race accused the incumbent president and government officials of abusing their power and supporting specific candidates. But president Karzai has always denied such accusations and emphasized the impartiality of the government and his ministers.

As seen, transparency of this year's election was much better than in the past two elections, due in part to the huge participation by the public. But the shortage of ballots in specific parts of the country showed the IEC lack of capability in preparing for this important day.

The IEC claims that it had dispatched 600 ballot papers for each polling center, estimating a one-minute time scale for each voter in a ten-hour day mission. But the independent and candidates' observers, reporters and the voters in these centers say that some polling centers ran out of ballot papers in the early hours of the day. According to reports in Balkh and Herat provinces, some centers ran out of ballot papers as early in the day as 11am.

When asked for an explanation, the IEC officials denied the claims, but insisted in prosecuting the perpetrators, if their investigation finds any staff guilty of fraud.

The ballot shortage not only deprived people from practicing their rights and casting their votes, but also brought the thoroughness of the elections as well as the independence of the Commission under question.

Perhaps it might not come as a surprise that the ballot shortage was mostly reported in the North and West of the country, where the frontrunners Dr. Abdullah Abdullah and Dr Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, the main competitors to the Dr. Zalmay Rassoul - a candidate said to be backed by the president - had large number of supporters.

With President Karzai cherry picking and appointing the entire commission's members and with reports surfacing about the ballot shortages in specific parts of the country, most people accuse the Commission of organizing a systematic fraud.

As expressed in social media sites, people believe that the ballot shortage in the North and West of the country was planned by the commission to stop the frontrunners from winning in the first round and to provide the president's favoured candidate with a chance to close the gap and make it among the top two in the race.

The upcoming days are crucial as observers and the media will closely monitor the process and inform the public about the results. Reports of any intentional wrongdoing by the IEC will not only undermine the results, but can also jeopardize the whole process.

The end

Zabihullah Noori, an independent Afghan journalist, is an executive board member of the Afghanistan Journalists Center