

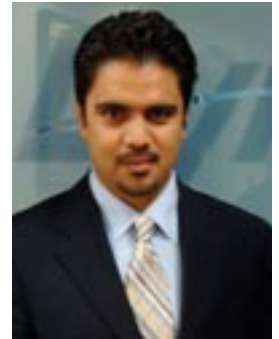
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS FORUM



IA-Forum Interview: M. Ashraf Haidari

The 2009 Presidential Elections and Future of Afghanistan

International Affairs Forum: Let's start with the widening threat of insecurity on the election day, this Thursday. Are you confident that the election will take place without any major incidents that would likely have a negative impact on the legitimacy of the results?



Mr. M. Ashraf Haidari: With the level of preparation made to ensure security for the election day, I can say that the people of Afghanistan will try to turn out to cast their vote this Thursday. Security of the elections has been a top priority of the Afghan national security forces, as well as that of our international partners over the past few months. Our ministries of defense and interior have fully mobilized to help provide and maintain security and law and order throughout the election period beginning on Thursday and the following days and weeks to come until the final results are officially announced. For our part, the Afghan government has declared a countrywide ceasefire on the election day in an effort to encourage and enable the electorate to vote for the candidate of their choice.

IA-Forum: Can you shed some light on the more specific security arrangements undertaken for the elections?

Mr. Haidari: Yes, we've worked with the U.S. and NATO partners to organize security in three rings: the Afghan National Police in the first ring closest to the polling stations, the Afghan National Army soldiers manning a second ring, and the U.S. and NATO troops in a third, outer ring. We've fielded some 47,000 police officers to help secure the polling stations. More than 100,000 international forces, both U.S. and NATO, are deployed throughout Afghanistan, and together with our security forces, there will be more than 300,000 troops and law enforcement officers on active duty on the election day to make sure that the registered voters get to cast their ballot this Thursday.

IA-Forum: How important is the role of your neighbors, particularly Pakistan and Iran, in helping Afghanistan ensure security this Thursday so that Afghans feel safe to turn out and vote?

Mr. Haidari: Let me stress the fact that our collective success in helping stabilize Afghanistan essentially serves the interests of every one of our six neighbors. Our neighbors, especially Pakistan and Iran, understand that Afghanistan's slide back into the turmoil of the 1990s will have far-reaching security and socio-economic implications for the region. We remember that as much as Pakistan hoped to control the Taliban movement, which the country had created and supported throughout their lifetime, extremist Taliban sheltered Al Qaeda and turned Afghanistan into a no-man's land for all kinds of illicit transnational activities. This did not only destabilize the region but also undermined international peace and security, particularly as Al Qaeda used stateless Afghanistan to launch worldwide terrorist attacks on the United States. And, of course, we thank Pakistan and Iran for continuing to host millions of Afghan refugees, but they understand

that these refugees will return home en masse if they perceive that peace and democracy will take root in Afghanistan.

IA-Forum: Pakistan's former President Musharraf is on record, saying that without their support, Afghanistan's past elections would not have happened. Is that a fair statement with respect to this year's elections?

Mr. Haidari: I think the credit of past successful elections must go to the Afghan people, who defied many terrorist threats and turned out in large numbers to vote. Once again, Afghans are demonstrating their strong will to participate in the elections, and turn out and vote this Thursday. At the same time, Pakistan's military and intelligence services also demonstrated their ability to keep the militants in check and under firm control during Afghanistan's 2004 and 2005 presidential and parliamentary elections. We have no doubt that these Pakistani institutions can help extend the same security cooperation this time again. And I think that honest intelligence sharing among Pakistan, Afghanistan, and our common allies is going to be the key to neutralizing any potential terrorist plots against strategic election targets, including the candidates, international observers, polling staff and stations in major areas, as well as civilians.

IA-Forum: Just three months ago, many Afghanistan observers believed that popular participation in the presidential campaigns would be very low given insecurity and popular dissatisfaction with the slow pace of international peace-building in Afghanistan. But recent coverage of the presidential campaigns show a different picture; we see larger and larger crowds of Afghans attending the campaign speeches and debates of different candidates, especially the leading candidates. To what do you attribute this unexpected level of popular enthusiasm to participate in the campaign process, and do you predict that Afghans will disregard the Taliban's recent warnings to turn out in large numbers again to cast their vote?

Mr. Haidari: Several things have actually contributed to the rising popular participation in the Afghan election campaigns. This may be surprising to foreign observers of Afghanistan, but it is certainly not for the Afghan people. First, Afghans see no alternative to the choice they made eight years ago when they welcomed the international community to our country, and then we embraced democracy as the basis of a representative government under a progressive constitution. Of course, many Afghans haven't yet benefited from the peace dividend, but they can clearly distinguish between the promise that democracy holds for the future of Afghanistan and the unspeakable suffering that the tyranny of extremists brought upon the Afghan people. Another reason for the high popular participation in the election process has to do with the demographics. The demographic landscape of Afghanistan has generationally changed in favor of a multi-candidate and competitive presidential election this year.

IA-Forum: Would you further explain the demographic role in this year's elections? Why is it in favor of a multi-candidate competitive process?

Mr. Haidari: Well, I discussed the issue last year at a conference organized by the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies. I said then that the voting age is 18, and if we recall from 2004 presidential elections, there were 10.5 million eligible voters, more than 80% of whom turned out to cast their votes. By the following year for the parliamentary elections, the number of eligible voters at 18 years of age rose to 12.5 million. So, if we add two million eligible voters to the electorate each year since 2005, we will have at least another six million young voters. This means that the majority of the electorate, about 16 million, in 2009 is between 18 and 40 years of age.

If we compare the current electorate to the previous ones, this age group of Afghans is more literate, educated, and aware of the domestic, regional, and international issues that affect the stabilization and reconstruction of Afghanistan. To give you an example: in 2004 and 2005, young Afghans were just getting cell phones

and beginning to take intermediate English courses across urban Afghanistan.

Today, they know how to text-message; they have multiple e-mail accounts; and they daily write blogs and interact on social networks such as the Facebook. Of course, not all eligible voters have knowledge of these facilities or access to, but they dominate both urban and rural populations; they constitute the largest job-less segment of our population and yet they are the bread winners of their families; and they are active in the formal and informal marketplace—all looking forward to a better future. In sum, the current electorate has many concerns and vested interests in the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2009 and 2010. So, I can say with confidence that, security allowing, most of the registered voters across Afghanistan will turn out this Thursday to cast their ballot.

IA-Forum: We know that several presidential candidates have already dropped out of the race to support others. How many candidates are there, and how many of them are women?

Mr. Haidari: There are now around 30 presidential candidates along with some 82 vice-presidential candidates. We shouldn't, of course, forget about some 3195 provincial council candidates, who are running for 420 seats across Afghanistan. Like 2004 and 2005 elections, women have actively participated in the election process this year; there are 2 female presidential candidates and 7 vice-presidential candidates running with their male counterparts. And I think it is important to note that 35 percent of all registered voters are women, which is a significant achievement in itself. Also, the number of women, challenging provincial council seats, increased by 20 percent compared to the 2004 and 2005 elections. So, despite many security concerns this year, more women have so far participated in the election process, and we can expect an even higher number of women to run for the parliamentary elections next year.

IA-Forum: What about the logistics aspect of the elections. Who is managing the entire process, such as manning the polling stations, resolving issues of voting fraud, and providing civic education to the electorate?

Mr. Haidari: The principal institution in charge of the presidential and provincial council elections is the Afghanistan Independent Election Commission. IEC is managing the staffing of 7,000 polling stations, some 300 more than in 2004. We know that more than 6,500 of these stations will be open with the rest most likely closed due to bad security in some areas of Helmand, Logar and Ghazni provinces. IEC is also manning 700 counting centers across Afghanistan and, overall, there will be 160,000 polling staff and 8,000 election monitors working to cover the election process throughout the country.

Issues of possible irregularities will be handled by the Electoral Complaints Commission, which is staffed by 270 people in Kabul. ECC has also offices in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan, helping resolve any fraud issues that may arise. On the civic education, IEC has led the efforts through some 1,600 civic educators, using all sorts of educational materials to inform voters of basic principles of voting. The Commission has also utilized broadcast media to run election ads, as well as informing the people of the important role that the Electoral Complaints Commission will be playing throughout the process.

IA-Forum: Turning to the aftermath of the elections, do you foresee any major changes in the way the international community and the Afghan government have so far worked to stabilize and rebuild Afghanistan?

Mr. Haidari: My personal opinion, based on international experience, has been that at the end of the day, holding elections is just a democratic exercise that must happen. What, however, matters the most, in case of Afghanistan, is the extent to which the international community will commit to helping us build democratic state institutions and a market economy so that democracy in Afghanistan will evolve and overtime become

sustainable. As far as the Afghan people are concerned, we know from every recent poll that Afghans are firmly committed to democratic governance.

True, more than two thirds of the Afghan people are illiterate, we are a deeply religious and traditional people, or we lack a large educated middle class—the characteristics, which some pessimistic observers of Afghanistan argue are against development of democracy in Afghanistan. But according to a recent Asia Foundation survey, 76 percent of Afghans say that democracy is better than any other form of government. Let me explain why this is so. First, the basic principles of the Afghan culture and Islam are compatible with democracy. Like most peoples of mountainous countries, Afghans are egalitarian and autonomous by nature, and reject totalitarian or authoritarian forms of government. Secondly, after three decades of war and suffering, Afghans are the most resilient, enterprising, and optimistic people, the vast majority of whom is young and looks forward to a better future. Mostly illiterate and uneducated, yes, but they are more experienced, they are more politically aware, and they have seen many ups and downs of life that clearly contribute to their firm determination to see Afghanistan governed democratically in the years and decades to come.

IA-Forum: Are you more optimistic or pessimistic about the future of Afghanistan?

Mr. Haidari: In the final analysis, it is the Afghan people, their determination, and their aspiration for a secure future that gives me much hope about the future of Afghanistan. Our international partners must capitalize on this strategic asset by simply delivering on the basic expectations of the Afghan people. And those basic expectations certainly are not about overnight transformation of our pre-war least developed and post-war most destroyed country. We're realistic and understand that development takes time. But we do expect a firm commitment from our allies to the process of developing Afghanistan. And I think that process, above all, begins with restoring, building, and strengthening our democratic state institutions so these institutions increasingly provide security, rule of law, and social services for the suffering people of Afghanistan, who have long waited for a peaceful normal life.

Mr. M. Ashraf Haidari is the Political Counselor of the Embassy of Afghanistan in Washington, DC. Mr. Haidari is a seasoned analyst of the Afghan and regional politics, and has extensively written on the stabilization and reconstruction of Afghanistan, as well as international security affairs. He was an International Peace Scholar and a Fellow in Foreign Service at Georgetown University from 2002-2005. His e-mail is haidari@embassyofafghanistan.org.