



## Why the upcoming presidential elections in Afghanistan are not as important as we think

por [Jorrit Kamminga](#), 23 de Diciembre de 2013

If there is anything my recent trip to Afghanistan with NATO's Transatlantic Opinion Leaders to Afghanistan tour (TOLA) has shown is that the upcoming presidential elections in April 2014 do not really matter. The elections will not trigger political transition and will not influence the international community's relationship with Afghanistan. Not the Afghan voters, but the international community will determine the future of stability and democracy in the country. There are three important reasons for why the upcoming presidential elections will not be a decisive moment or a crucial test for the nascent democracy of a country in transition.

First, both the process and outcome of the presidential elections will not change the political situation in Afghanistan in the short term. There will be no huge disruption of the election process and there will be no real break with current politics. While the role of former warlords may be decreasing, there is still a political scene that is dominated by former mujahedeen, some of whom are linked to the extreme violence and human right violations of the past. Abdul Rasul Sayyaf and Abdul Rashid Dostum are the clearest examples.

While president Karzai steps down, the 'Karzai era' has therefore clearly not come to an end yet, despite the fact that most Afghans have never experienced life under Soviet occupation, during the civil war or under the Taliban regime. In 2015 there will be more than 13 million young Afghans (more than a third of the population) that will have been born after 9/11. The young generation of Afghanistan will ultimately change the political landscape in Afghanistan, but not yet in 2014, perhaps only in 2019 or 2024. A Facebook generation has already come to the fore, but so far they cannot put their stamp on Afghan politics.

Second, the presidential elections will not change security and stability in the country. All candidates will make sure the elections will result in a more or less stable political settlement. Not only because many of them want the current local power arrangements to remain in place, but especially because they have one political agenda in common: keeping the political situation stable enough to keep foreign aid and assistance coming in. Despite the growing political rhetoric against the West that president Karzai has been displaying over the past years, all candidates know they need the West, to pay for the salaries of the newly trained Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) but especially to keep the aid economy going from which all take their share, whether legally or illegally.

Without continued foreign assistance to pay for the army and police, the state will collapse and there will be no winners. All presidential candidates understand this reality and know the Afghan people are increasingly discontented with the violence and local power struggles that are still ubiquitous in the country. Shaping and reshaping the political coalitions may require a lot of financial and political bargaining between candidates before and after the elections, but that will all lead towards a stable outcome, not towards fragmentation of Afghanistan. To win the elections, Pashtun candidates know that they will also have to accommodate Tajik voters. Similarly, Abdullah Abdullah, the only alternative for a Pashtun ticket, knows he has to win over part of the Pashtun population in the south and east of the country. In this way, all tickets tend to become similar in the elections.

Third, as the elections do not completely coincide with the end of the current International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission, they will not really influence the military campaign. The Taliban will not use it as a decisive point in time to change their strategy. As in 2009, they will try to disrupt the election process and they will try to kill some high-profile targets, ideally a presidential candidate. But they know they cannot stop the elections or win militarily, and they know they will never again be able to rule the entire country.

The past fighting season has shown that despite an increase in violence and casualties of the ANSF, the Taliban has had no decisive victories and has not reached its strategic objectives beyond (international) media attention. Faced with this powerlessness, the different Taliban groups will wait until 2015 before they make the next substantial move. They will at least test the real strength of the ANSF once most of the foreign troops are out of the country during the Spring/Summer fighting season of 2015. Why commit to serious peace negotiations before your primary opponent is about to lose most of its direct military support from the West?

The presidential elections will not give Afghanistan a sovereign leader that will turn his back on the West. Afghanistan will remain an aid-dependent country and the next president will know the importance of continuity of the foreign aid relationships. Afghanistan currently only raises about 10 percent (2 billion USD) of GDP domestically. We should therefore not worry about the elections taking place in Afghanistan. The most important decisions are not taken in Afghanistan on April 5, 2014 as the Afghans will still not determine their own future.

Instead, the most important decisions are taken in the political capitals of the NATO member states and partner countries. In coming months, especially after president Karzai has signed a Bilateral Security Agreement with Afghanistan, the parliaments of these countries will ultimately decide the future of security and stability in Afghanistan. If they decide to support the new NATO mission to train, advice and assist the Afghan security forces with enough resources, they can make sure there is enough funding to continue the important training and capacity building efforts that are really changing the face of Afghan politics, one step at a time.

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