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Fake Afghan Poll Sites Favored Karzai, Officials Assert

By [DEXTER FILKINS](#) and [CARLOTTA GALL](#)

KABUL, [Afghanistan](#) — Afghans loyal to President [Hamid Karzai](#) set up hundreds of fictitious polling sites where no one voted but where hundreds of thousands of ballots were still recorded toward the president's re-election, according to senior Western and Afghan officials here.

The fake sites, as many as 800, existed only on paper, said a senior Western diplomat in Afghanistan, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the political delicacy of the vote. Local workers reported that hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of votes for Mr. Karzai in the election last month came from each of those places. That pattern was confirmed by another Western official based in Afghanistan.

"We think that about 15 percent of the polling sites never opened on Election Day," the senior Western diplomat said. "But they still managed to report thousands of ballots for Karzai."

Besides creating the fake sites, Mr. Karzai's supporters also took over approximately 800 legitimate polling centers and used them to fraudulently report tens of thousands of additional ballots for Mr. Karzai, the officials said.

The result, the officials said, is that in some provinces, the pro-Karzai ballots may exceed the people who actually voted by a factor of 10. "We are talking about orders of magnitude," the senior Western diplomat said.

The widening accounts of fraud pose a stark problem for the Obama administration, which has 68,000 American troops deployed here to help reverse gains by [Taliban](#) insurgents. American officials hoped that the election would help turn Afghans away from the Taliban by giving them a greater voice in government. Instead, the Obama administration now faces the prospect of having to defend an Afghan administration for the next five years that is widely seen as illegitimate.

"This was fraud en masse," the Western diplomat said.

Most of the fraud perpetrated on behalf of Mr. Karzai, officials said, took place in the Pashtun-dominated areas of the east and south where officials said that turnout on Aug. 20 was exceptionally low. That included Mr. Karzai's home province, Kandahar, where preliminary results indicate that more than 350,000 ballots have been turned in to be counted. But Western officials estimated that only about 25,000 people actually voted there.

Waheed Omar, the main spokesman for Mr. Karzai's campaign, acknowledged Sunday that there had been cases of fraud committed by different candidates. But he accused the president's opponents of trying to score

political points by making splashy accusations in the news media. “There have been cases — we have reported numerous cases — and our view is the only place where discussion can be held is in the Election Complaints Commission,” he said.

American officials have mostly kept a public silence about the fraud allegations. A senior American official said Sunday that they were looking into the allegations behind the scenes. “An absence of public statements does not mean an absence of concern and engagement on these issues,” the official said.

But a different Western official in Kabul said that there were divisions among the international community and Afghan political circles over how to proceed. This official said he believed the next four or five days would decide whether the entire electoral process would stand or fall. “This is crunch time,” he said.

Adding to the drumbeat, on Sunday the deputy director of the Afghan Independent Election Commission said that the group was disqualifying all the ballots cast in 447 polling sites because of fraud. The deputy director, Daoud Ali Najafi, said it was not clear how many votes had been affected, or what percentage they represented of the total. He gave no details of what fraud had been discovered.

With about three-quarters of the ballots counted in the Aug. 20 election, Mr. Karzai leads with nearly 49 percent of the vote, compared with 32 percent for his main challenger, [Abdullah Abdullah](#). If no candidate receives more than 50 percent, the election goes to a runoff.

Officials in Kabul say it will probably take months before the Election Complaints Commission, which is dominated by Westerners appointed by the [United Nations](#), will be able to declare a winner. Such an interregnum with no clear leader in office could prove destabilizing for a country that is already beset by ethnic division and an increasingly violent insurgency.

One opposition candidate for president, [Ashraf Ghani](#), the former finance minister, said that the scale of the fraud on Election Day had deeply damaged the political process that was being slowly built in Afghanistan.

“For five years Mr. Karzai was my president,” he said in an interview at his home in Kabul. “Now how many Afghans will consider him their president?”

Since ballots were cast last month, anecdotal evidence has emerged of widespread fraud across the Pashtun-dominated areas of southern and eastern Afghanistan, where Mr. Karzai has many allies. Many of the allegations come from Kandahar Province, where Mr. Karzai’s younger brother, [Ahmed Wali Karzai](#), is the chairman of the provincial council and widely regarded as the most powerful man in the region. Last week, the governor of Shorabak District, which lies in Kandahar Province, claimed that Hamid Karzai’s allies shut down all the polling centers in the area and falsified 23,900 ballots for Mr. Karzai.

Two provincial council candidates in Kandahar, both close to the government, confirmed that widespread pro-Karzai fraud had occurred, in particular in places where poor security prevented observers and candidates’ representatives from watching.

“Now people will not trust the provincial council and the government system,” said Muhammad Ehsan, the deputy head of the provincial council, who was running for re-election. “Now people understand who has come to power and how.”

Hajji Abdul Majid, 75, the chief of the tribal elders council in Argestan District, in Kandahar Province, said that despite the fact that security forces opened the town's polling place, no one voted, so any result from his district would be false.

"The people know that the government just took control of the district center for that day of the elections," he said. "People are very frustrated. They don't believe in the government."

He added: "If Karzai is re-elected, people will leave the country or join the Taliban."

More evidence of fraud has emerged in the past few days. In Zangabad, about 20 miles west of Kandahar, local residents say no voting took place on Aug. 20. The village's single polling site, the Sulaiman Mako School, is used by Taliban guerrillas as their headquarters, the residents said. The area around Zangabad is one of the most contested in Afghanistan. Despite the nonexistent turnout, Afghan election records show that nearly 2,000 ballots were collected from the Sulaiman Mako School and sent to Kabul to be counted by election officials.

The allegations in Zangabad are being echoed throughout the Panjwai District. Official Afghan election records show that 16 polling centers were supposed to be open on Election Day. But according to at least one local leader, only a fraction of that number actually existed.

Haji Agha Lalai is a senior member of the provincial council in Kandahar, where Panjwai is located. As a candidate for re-election, he sent election observers across the area, including to Panjwai. In an interview, Mr. Lalai said that only "five or six" polling centers were open in Panjwai District that day — far fewer than the 16 claimed by the Afghan government.

So far, the Independent Election Commission has released results from seven of Panjwai District's polling centers. The tally so far: 5,213 votes for Mr. Karzai, 328 for Mr. Abdullah.

Dexter Filkins reported from Kabul and Istanbul, and Carlotta Gall from Kandahar and Kabul.

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