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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Afghanistan Votes, the U.N. Dithers

By PETER W. GALBRAITH

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates

IF the second round of Afghanistan's presidential elections, now scheduled for Nov. 7, is a rerun of the fraud-stained first round, it will be catastrophic for that country and the allied military mission battling the Taliban and Al Qaeda. In the next week and a half, the United States and the United Nations, which has a mandate to support Afghanistan's electoral bodies, must do everything possible to ensure that the election is, in the words of that mandate, "free, fair and transparent."

In spite of the clear connection between successful elections and stability in Afghanistan, the rest of the world largely chose to ignore the obvious risks of fraud before the Aug. 20 polling and the evidence of fraud immediately afterward. As a result, Afghanistan has endured a political crisis that has threatened to divide the country along ethnic lines and undermined domestic support for President Obama's counterinsurgency strategy.

There have been a few recent encouraging signs. After the Electoral Complaints Commission, a United Nations-backed group, threw out more than a million fraudulent votes for the incumbent president, Hamid Karzai, the Obama administration asked Senator John Kerry to persuade Mr. Karzai to respect the Afghan Constitution and accept a runoff with his main challenger, Abdullah Abdullah.

This diplomacy dissuaded President Karzai from continuing to assert that the complaint commission's verdict should be dismissed as improper "foreign interference." While the United Nations appointed three of the commission's five members, it is truly an Afghan institution regulated by a law that Mr. Karzai signed.

Also encouraging, the United Nations mission in Afghanistan announced that, as an antifraud measure, the number of polling centers will now be reduced and that some 200 district-level election officials will be replaced.

Still, much more needs to be done. The conditions that made fraud possible in the first round are still present. Although the Election Complaint Commission did a Herculean job of tossing out illegitimate votes, the final tally still included hundreds of thousands of phony ballots, most for Mr. Karzai.

Let me explain. At the time of the August vote, I was the deputy United Nations envoy in Afghanistan, and my staff collected compelling evidence that the actual turnout in southern and eastern Afghanistan was extremely small. Yet surprisingly large numbers of votes were being recorded in those areas. Many of these fraudulent votes came from "ghost" polling centers — stations identified on maps, but not existing physically, in areas so dangerous that they could not be visited by candidates' agents, monitors or voters.

We knew about this problem in advance. In July, I tried to get the Independent Election Commission to close some 1,500 of the ghost polling centers but was stopped by the top United Nations official in Afghanistan, Kai Eide of Norway, who insisted that he had no mandate other than to go along with the decisions of the election commission. My disagreement with Mr. Eide eventually led the United Nations secretary-general, Ban Ki-moon, to recall me from Afghanistan on Oct. 1.

Mr. Ban later said he fired me because I had tried to disenfranchise Afghan voters. But all I wanted to do was to eliminate polling centers that didn't exist. Afghans risked their lives to go to the polls, and were effectively disenfranchised when their votes were diluted by more than a million fake ones.

Looking ahead, the biggest obstacle to fair elections remains the body that administers them, the Independent Election Commission. The only thing independent about the commission is its name. President Karzai appointed all its members, and six of the seven commissioners have routinely voted in favor of procedures to benefit the Karzai campaign, including an outrageous last-minute decision after the first vote to include enough fraudulent Karzai votes in the preliminary tally to put him over the 50 percent threshold so he could avoid a runoff.

In every instance of fraud, Independent Election Commission staff members either committed the abuse, cooperated with those who committed it, or knew about it and failed to report it. Some 200 staff members are now to be fired, but thousands are implicated and should be replaced, as should the partisan provincial election officials who appointed them.

Although the United Nations mission raised more than \$300 million — much of it from American taxpayers — to allow the Independent Election Commission to conduct the elections, it exercised negligible oversight over the commission's decisions. The United Nations must stop pretending that the commission is anything other than a pro-Karzai institution. Since it is not feasible to replace the commissioners at this late date, Secretary-General Ban should appoint an envoy to supervise them in a way that Mr. Eide refuses to. Foreign Minister Carl Bildt of Sweden or Louise Arbour, a former United Nations human rights commissioner, would both be good choices for this brief assignment. They have reputations for impartiality and are tough enough to force the election commission to take fraud seriously.

President Karzai is widely expected to win the second round. But even if the voting is reasonably honest, his victory will be tainted at home and abroad. Dr. Abdullah, his opponent, has proposed smart constitutional changes to provide for greater power-sharing among Afghanistan's diverse ethnic groups, including having the Parliament choose a prime minister and the cabinet, electing provincial governors and increasing the powers of elected local governments.

Once Afghanistan's nightmare elections are finally over, the United Nations should encourage Afghans to consider these and other reforms, as the status quo promises only to prolong the country's crisis of legitimacy.

Peter W. Galbraith, a former United States ambassador to Croatia, was the deputy special representative of the secretary-general of the United Nations in Afghanistan from June 1 to Oct. 1.

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