

A Vote for Afghanistan



“In a land fabled for traditional mores and where modernity is light years away from touching the average Afghan’s way of life, the idea of democracy has become the only decent option.”

[Sreeram Chaulia](#) 9 April 2014

The extraordinary voter turnout of 58 per cent in last weekend’s presidential election in Afghanistan sends a message of steely determination from a nation wracked by war and state failure. Compared to the 39 per cent, who cast ballots in the previous tainted election of 2009, the latest exercise of mass franchise is a clear demonstration that political participation and involvement in democratic practice have deepened as a matter of faith among citizens facing dire insecurity and economic hardships.

Irrespective of which candidate wins and succeeds President Hamid Karzai, the people can collectively take pride that they voted for Afghanistan and its future.

Remarkable episodes are being reported of polling stations firebombed by the Taliban, yet reopening shortly after the gory incidents for snaking queues of undeterred voters proudly displaying ink on their fingers. Even the strongholds of the Taliban and allied jihadists in the south and east of the country witnessed historic manifestation of popular will through peaceful means.

How can a society pulverised by violence develop exemplary courage in the face of brutal terror? Afghans defied the Taliban’s ban on voting or competing in elections because they know deep within that there is no alternative path to nation-building except democratic transfer of power. In a land fabled for traditional mores and where modernity is light years away from touching the average Afghan’s way of life, the idea of democracy has become the only decent option for the people. The New York Times quoted one voter saying that Afghans have resoundingly rejected their country’s old ways of getting a new king or leader “by death and violence”, thanks to the idea of a more civilised method called democracy.

Leading the winds of change in Afghan society are two hitherto marginalised sections, viz. the youth and the women. For a demographically youthful nation like Afghanistan, where 75 per cent of the population is below the age of 25, revolutionary shifts in attitudes towards politics within a short and rapid timeframe are not inconceivable.

Granular statistics about the percentage of first-time voters in the overall turnout are not available for Afghanistan, but there is little doubt that the very young were at the vanguard of the new positive thinking about elections as a means for deliverance. I spoke to Afghan university students just after the polls closed and heard common refrains that the youth “are more serious about politics” and “less in awe of traditional authorities” like clerics, warlords and tribal chieftains.

Long decades of warfare had already shattered Afghanistan’s age-old social leadership structures, which sustained orthodox thought and action. Through the crucible of destruction comes the seed of regeneration. Today’s young Afghans of different class and ethnic backgrounds are more open to learning from the rest of the world and reformulating the boundaries of what is possible.

Western opinion makers claim that contemporary Afghan youth are from “Generation America.” However, the influences of successful democracies like India, which is much beloved among Afghan people of various hues, and Turkey, where Islam and democracy have found a harmonious via media, are also quite strong on the Afghan psyche. Increasing access to the Internet and the shared experiences of the Afghan diaspora from around the world are other sources for inspiring a shift in the political culture.

Although Western donors, aid agencies and militaries are desperately looking for bragging rights after one decade of pouring in blood and treasure to stabilise Afghanistan, most Afghan youth are conflicted in their minds about the American and European roles in their country.

Young Afghans do not believe that the Americans and Europeans who have underwritten the transition from Taliban rule to democracy over the last decade are blameless angels or good Samaritans without vested interests. The ranks of Taliban fighters are drawn from the youth of the Pashtun community who do not accept American military presence on Afghan soil.

Youth power for democratising Afghanistan cannot be exaggerated at the present juncture of political evolution where accountable government is still an aspiration.

In a war-scarred nation that has lost so many generations to untimely death, senior civil servants are just in their early 30s and news media outlets are run by barely 20 somethings. But none of the top contenders for winning the race for the presidency is

below the age of 50. The entrenched power configurations and patron-client relationships around which politics have revolved in the last decade also ensured the presence of prominent warlords as presidential candidates or vice-presidential running mates.

Yet, the social base that is rising up and taking the plunge into active citizenship is so youthful that the disconnect between political elites and the people will widen until a tipping point comes and brings to the fore younger and more visionary leadership.

The women of Afghanistan have also witnessed a great surge in participation in the electoral process. The mere fact that one of the main contenders for the presidency, Zalmay Rassoul, fielded a female running mate, Habiba Sarabi, has energised women at the grassroots to expand the horizon of permissibles. Much to the chagrin of the misogynistic Taliban, a record 300 female candidates contested the provincial council elections that occurred simultaneously with the presidential polls.

One cannot wish away the vast panoply of problems of kleptocratic corruption (Afghanistan ranks at the bottom of the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index), crushing unemployment and poverty (Afghanistan's Human Development Index ranking is 175th out of 186 countries), and a war that is unlikely to end as long as Western militaries stay put. The sore of a predatory neighbour, Pakistan, that prefers a fragmented Afghanistan is also not going to be magically healed by any post-Karzai dispensation.

But the people have sounded a notice that they want a regime to deliver both governance and security. And if Karzai's successor fails like him, the participatory potential sparked by this election will create the basis for new revolutionary politics without recourse to the gun.

The writer is a professor and dean at the Jindal School of International Affairs