

Early Trends in Afghan Elections: Abdullah Leads the Show

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There have been three major surveys held recently predicting the future leader of Afghanistan, which indicate that the Presidential race is almost certain to enter the second round as none of the candidates may be able to poll more than 50 per cent of the votes.

The poll survey conducted by Glevum Associates¹, in which 2148 prospective voters from 34 provinces of the country gave their views on the candidates and overall election scenario in Afghanistan. The trends emerging from the survey are: 90 per cent of the respondents said that they would not vote for a candidate against whom there are allegations of corruption. 61 per cent said they would vote for someone who could open talks with Taliban, 51 per cent supported candidates willing to maintain good relations with Pakistan, and 71 per cent for those who advocated good relations with the USA.

Coming to their view on the candidates, 29 per cent supported the candidacy of Ashraf Ghani, a former World Bank expert, who is one among the three probable candidates President Karzai is supposed to favour.² Abdullah Abdullah, runner up in 2009 Presidential poll and former Foreign Minister, came second with 25 per cent. The rest of the candidates, including Abdul Rab Rasoul SayAAF, polled under 10 per cent and have little hope of success in the upcoming elections, unless some dramatic event alters the equations drastically.

¹ Afghanistan Presidential Election 2014 Poll Results (Wave 1), *Glevum Associates*, December 2013 available at

<http://glevumassociates.com/doc/GlevumAfghanistanPresidentialElection2014WaveOneSurveyFindings%20.pdf>

² Polling Comes to Afghanistan, Suggesting Limit to Sway of President Karzai, *The New York Times*, December 28, 2013 available at http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/29/world/asia/polling-comes-to-afghanistan-suggesting-limit-to-sway-of-president-karzai.html?_r=0

The two other polls put Ashraf Ghani in the second place. The first among them was done by Democracy International³, based in United States. It found in its survey, out of the three planned, in January 2014, that 25 per cent of the 2500 people it surveyed would vote for Ashraf Ghani, while 31 per cent of them supported Abdullah's candidature. The third poll by Tolo News and ATR Consulting⁴, both based in Kabul, placed the candidates roughly in the same order as Democracy International, with Abdullah leading the race. Though the methodology of this poll is far less exhaustive, the last poll is regarded by observers in Afghanistan as more credible. It is believed that Tolo News has extensive reach in Afghanistan as the most-watched television channel in Afghanistan and thus its pre-poll survey may have more impact on the people than the other two provided above.

In all these opinion surveys, there is a clear preference for two candidates— Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani. Among the two, Abdullah, despite his father being a Pashtun, is regarded as Tajik among the people. Claiming to represent the legacy of legendary Tajik leader Ahmad Shah Massoud, he has Muhammad Khan, a Hizb-i-Islami leader, and well-known Hajara leader Muhammad Mohaqiq as his vice presidential nominees. The fact that Massoud's brother is in the fray as a vice presidential candidate with Zalmay Rassoul may divide his votes among the Tajiks and pose a critical challenge for him in the election. Nevertheless, his continuing efforts to reach out to the people at the grassroots may work in his favour, as massive turnouts in his campaign trail indicate.

Interactions with Afghans suggest that Ghani also runs an equally good chance. He is perceived as a liberal who has introduced a new kind of politics in the war-torn country, where ethnicity-based political system focussing primarily on tribal loyalty has been determining the course of elections for many decades. He favours inclusive politics. Ghani has tried had over the years to reach out to all the factions and ethnicities in the country. As per media reports, he is even popular among religious leaders, some of whom are affiliated to Taliban, despite being a liberal.

In his campaigns, he is presenting a very sanguine picture of Afghanistan by assuring people about his intention to include people from all ethnicities in his cabinet, who have the will and potential to steer the country out of its present mess. He has even claimed that if he

³ Afghanistan Public Opinion Polling Project-Results of First Poll, *Democracy International*, January, 2014 available at <http://democracyinternational.com/publications/afghanistan-public-opinion-polling-project-results-first-poll>

⁴ New Survey reveals Frontrunners for Presidential Bid, *Tolo News*, December 22, 2013 available at <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/13181-survey-emroz>

wins he would knock the doors of Abdullah a hundred times to include him in his cabinet as foreign minister, a responsibility he had earlier shouldered quite ably for four years. This is something very new to Afghan politics, where such amity among factions and ethnicities is rarely seen. He has strong vice presidential running mates in the Uzbek strongman Dostam and the moderate Hazara leader Sarwar Danish, popular among urban youth. His success in the elections will largely depend on his ability to woo Tajik votes.

Apart from these two, recent political developments have catapulted Zalmay Rassoul, former foreign minister, to the political centre-stage as the third most probable candidate. This is so because Karzai's elder brother, Qayum Karzai, withdrew from the presidential elections in his favour barely a month before the polling, despite the fact that a tribal Jirga in Kandahar had voted overwhelmingly in his favour as the preferred candidate in case of an electoral understanding between the two, in February. Apparently, it was Karzai who played a major role in dissuading his brother and the Jirga-men in support of Rassoul's candidature.⁵ Rassoul is a moderate and has a relatively clean record as a politician. Moreover, the vice presidential nominees in his presidential ticket have cleaner records compared to that of others in the fray. One of them is the only female candidate in the election, while the other is the brother of Ahmad Shah Massoud, who is likely to eat into the Tajik votes creating problems for Abdullah as has been noted above.

Abdul Rab Rassoul Sayyaf is another heavyweight who has a decent chance of turning the tide in his favour as well. As a former mujahideen leader he has his own pockets of support in the tribal hinterland. Moreover, as a proponent of west-sponsored democratic experiment in Afghanistan, he has managed to appeal to the liberals, who look upon him as an ideal candidate for post-election reconciliation with radical elements, and also as somebody who can provide an ideological alternative to Taliban. He has Tajik warlord Ismail Khan of Herat and conservative Uzbek politician Abdul Irfan from Takhar as his running mates, through whom he may access some minority votes as well.

Others in the fray have less chances of making it to the run off. Important ones among them are Qutubddin Helal, Gul Agha Sherzai, Mohammad Naeem Khan, Abdul Rahim Wardak and Dawood Sultanzoi. Helal has received support from Hezb-i-Islami chief

⁵ "Karzai's brother to bow out of Afghan Race", *Wall Street Journal*, March 5, 2014, available at <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304554004579421271994641140>

Gulbudin Hekmatyar⁶ which may ensure Pashtun support for him in the eastern pockets of the country. Sherzai, a regional strongman and former governor of Kandahar and Nangarhar, has some following among the Pashtuns and may win the support of another Pashtun candidate Hedayat Amim Arsala, as media reports suggest. Naeem Khan is the grandson of former King Zahir Shah. Wardak, former defence minister, has some support among the Pashtuns. Sultanzoi, a Pashtun and a pilot by training, had polled well in the last election among Pashtuns in Ghazni. However, none of them has any chance of getting anywhere close to the run off.

As things stand today, none of the candidates is likely to get more than fifty per cent of the votes in the election scheduled for April 5, 2014. Afghan analysts also apprehend delays in the run-off, in case the election commission is called upon to investigate into allegations of poll irregularities, which may prolong the phase of political uncertainty unnecessarily. Therefore, coalitions are being worked out behind the scene to avoid a run-off. However, given the divisions within each of the ethnic groups in Afghanistan, it is unlikely that any decisive bipolar coalition will emerge before the election to spare the country of yet another round of election.

In all probability, Abdullah runs the best chance of making it to the run off at the moment, followed by Ashraf Ghani, unless of course, Qayum Karzai's support works magic for Zalmai Rassoul propelling him to the second place. In case of a run off, it is likely that all Pashtun votes may get consolidated against Abdullah, making it difficult for him to win in the end. But a lot will depend on whether the Pashtuns will come out to vote despite the Taliban warnings not to participate in the elections.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.

⁶ "Gulbudin Hekmatyar Supports Qutubddin Helal in presidential election", *Khaama Press*, February 15, 2014 available at <http://www.khaama.com/gulbuddin-hekmatyar-supports-qotbuddin-hilal-in-presidential-election-2800>