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Democracy in Afghanistan: The 2014 Election and Beyond

Paul D. Miller

Afghanistan's upcoming presidential election—set for April 5, 2014—is the most important political event in that country's decade-long transition to democracy. While the overthrow of the Taliban, the Bonn Process of political reconstruction, and the initial rounds of elections in 2004–2005 and 2009–2010 started Afghanistan down the path of democratization, they were only a beginning. The most important election in a country's transition to democracy is not the first one, but the second or third—after the novelty and excitement of liberalization have faded, after international donors and observers have withdrawn, after the mundane reality of democratic politics sets in—and, crucially, after the first set of democratically elected leaders are replaced.

In 2014, Afghanistan faces just such an election. Hamid Karzai will leave office, making him the first widely recognized Afghan leader ever to voluntarily and peacefully hand over power. Two previous rounds of elections have left some Afghans disillusioned and uncertain if real democracy—honest and competent—has a future in their country. International military forces handed over responsibility for the country's security to Afghan security forces in July and will be in the advanced stages of withdrawal next year. Donors, led by the United States, have already begun lessening their financial commitment to Afghanistan's political and economic reconstruction.

That makes the 2014 election make-or-break time for Afghan democracy. If Afghans can hold elections on time and elect someone relatively honest and competent under a process open and transparent enough to persuade all parties to accept the result—and if they can do so in the face of insecurity, international skepticism, and huge logistical challenges—the election could become a catalyst for Afghans to rally around their government, trigger negotiations with the Taliban, and ensure continued donor support for development. If they cannot, the worst prognostications for Afghanistan's future—political breakdown, fragmentation of the security forces, or even civil war—become far more likely. As

Andrew Wilder of the U.S. Institute of Peace told Congress earlier this year, "The stakes in 2014 are not simply the election of a new Afghan leadership, but the endurance of Afghanistan's constitutional political order."[1]

Because the stakes are high, the international community should recognize that, despite a dozen years of frustration and halting progress, Afghanistan's political and economic reconstruction needs one more push before the milestone election. Helping Afghanistan across the electoral finish line will increase the odds that the country will find some sort of solution to its internal stability and, thus, be able to deny safe haven to al Qaida and its affiliates. The UN Secretary General reported in September that "effective, representative institutions are the foundation of stable transition processes. The 2014 Presidential elections, and the extent to which they are conducted inclusively, will be the surest basis of internal legitimacy."[2] Failure, by contrast, means that Afghanistan will not simply revert to its pre-2001 state, when it at least had a government that could be held accountable for al Qaida's actions and was capable of taking meaningful action against the drug trade. If the 2014 elections fail, Afghanistan may not have even those minimal silver linings, and could slide into the sort of permanent anarchy that has gripped Somalia and parts of the Congo for decades—except it will be an anarchy on al Qaida's home turf, fueled by the world's largest drug trade, on the doorstep of nuclear-armed Pakistan.

Background

The first post-Taliban election in Afghanistan, in 2004, was justly celebrated as a major step for the country. Afghans enthusiastically participated in their first election since 1969—some 8.1 million ballots were cast—and images of Afghan women with ink-stained fingers instantly become iconic of democracy's universal potential. Between roughly 80 and 90 percent of Afghans expressed support in public opinion polls for equal rights, electoral accountability, political parties, and peaceful opposition.[3] The Taliban seemed to be a beaten force, the economy was growing in double digits, Kabul was an open city, and hope was clearly in the air.

But the relative success of Afghanistan's founding election—that it was actually held, widely participated in, and generally accepted as legitimate by Afghans and the international community—was, in historical perspective, not unusual. Other postconflict or transitioning states have had successful founding elections—those that inaugurate a newly democratic regime—such as in Nicaragua in 1990, Cambodia in 1992, Mozambique in 1994, and Bosnia in 1996—to say nothing of elections in West Germany and Japan in 1946. Debacles like those in Angola in 1992, in which the loser launched a civil war, or Liberia in 1997, in which Liberians elected a brutal warlord because they feared what he would do if he lost, are surprisingly exceptional. The relative success of founding elections is counterintuitive. Elections are expensive, inconvenient, and logistically challenging. Founding elections typically take place after conflict—whether civil war (Bosnia), a war for independence (East Timor), or an interstate war (West Germany). Thus, founding elections often take place against a backdrop of some combination of poverty, divisive social cleavages, wrecked infrastructure, poor social capital, brain drain, absent or oppressive governance, and more. Without good governance or public security, criminal gangs, warlords, and smugglers often flourish.

A primary reason that founding elections succeed is probably because they attract an enormous amount of resources and atten-

tion, both domestically and internationally. Parties in a postconflict or transitioning state agree to elections only if they conclude that elections are more cost-effective for pursuing their agenda than fighting. Having reached that conclusion, parties would naturally devote all the time, energy, and resources previously devoted to fighting to political contestation instead. The civilian population likely recognizes that elections mean an opportunity for peace and thus a return to normalcy, which would incline them to take the trouble and risk of registering to vote and casting a ballot. Prior to a democratic transition, democracy can be seen as an aspirational ideal: It hasn't had a chance to fail and thus cause disillusionment. And the large and well-resourced constellation of nongovernmental organizations, aid agencies, and international bodies devoted to democratization, elections, and political transition tends to focus intently on founding elections. Finally, there is an intangible element about founding elections, a certain atmosphere that inspires devotion from the population, *esprit de corps* among election workers and security personnel, and idealism from international backers. They represent a once-in-a-generation opportunity to accomplish something of lasting good. Founding elections are successful for the same reason that sports teams perform better during official contests than during practice: It's game day.

Such advantages are missing during second and third elections, while many of the challenges remain. The initial excitement is gone, elites may become disillusioned upon discovering the true extent of their popular support, voters may be discouraged that an election does not automatically get the roads paved or spur immediate job creation, and international donors often move on to the next crisis—all while postconflict conditions, such as unemployment and insecurity, endure. It is precisely for these reasons that second or third elections are actually more important: They are a genuine test of a country's dedication to the democratic process when it is no longer convenient, a magnet for donor aid, or an international *cause célèbre*. As one scholar has written, "If nothing else, the convening of scheduled multiparty elections serves the minimal function of marking democracy's survival."[4]

Afghanistan's 2009 election was troubled for predictable reasons. It was a big test because Afghans administered the elections for the first time, the 2004–2005 elections having been administered by the UN-dominated Joint Electoral Management Body (JEMB). While the 2009 election did occur—no small achievement—the result was tainted by lower turnout, especially in Pashtun areas wracked by worse violence than in 2004 (although even then some five million legitimate ballots were probably cast), and widespread accusations of corruption undermined the election's credibility for many Afghans. The Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) eventually invalidated more than one million ballots deemed fraudulent, and a second-round election was triggered when Karzai was found to have fallen short of the 50 percent threshold—only to be canceled when his chief challenger, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, withdrew under heavy international pressure and because of his own skepticism that a credible second round could be held.

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Fortunately, the 2009 election was essentially a dry run for the real test—the 2014 election. The international community still provided funding and security in 2009 and, reportedly, was heavily involved in brokering the political bargain between Karzai and Abdullah that ended the postelection crisis. The election did not test the Afghans' ability to hold their own election. Additionally, Karzai won, as he was widely expected to, so the election did not test the Afghans' commitment to a peaceful transfer of power. Instead, the 2009 election should be a cautionary tale for the international community, illustrating both the danger and the promise of the 2014 election: the danger of how insecurity and corruption could undermine the election, and the promise of how the Afghans, who were fully in charge of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) for the first time, administered the process and investigated allegations of corruption. The latter point, in particular, is widely overlooked by observers who focus on the corruption rather than on the existence of an Afghan-led process that successfully investigated the allegations and threw out over a million ballots.

2014 Challenges

The list of challenges confronting the Afghans as they approach the 2014 election is formidable. First and most pressing is continued insecurity. The Taliban insurgency, on the defensive during the 2010–2012 surge of international troops, appears to have regained momentum. Civilian casualties rose again in 2013 after declining in 2012, according to the United Nations, suggesting security is worsening as international forces withdraw and Afghan forces take the lead. The insurgents have demonstrated a continued capability to launch spectacular attacks, including a brazen 2011 assault on Camp Bastion, in Helmand Province, that destroyed eight Harrier jets; a massive truck bomb in July 2012, thought to be the largest explosion of the war in Kabul; and a sophisticated attack on Kandahar Airfield in August 2013. International military forces, meanwhile, are already at their lowest levels since 2010 and scheduled to continue withdrawing. The IEC was unable to update the voter registry in four districts in Zabul, Ghazni, and Helmand Provinces because of insecurity, and there were 14 recorded attacks on voter registration sites or personnel in the fall and winter.[5] Nonetheless, the Ministry of Interior recently judged that Afghan forces could secure 96 percent of the nearly 7,000 polling stations—including more than 1,100 "high-threat" stations[6]—and Afghan army and police units continue to increase in quantity and quality. The disenfranchisement of voters dependent on the 4 percent of stations that will not open because of insecurity is troubling—and could make the difference in a close-fought election, especially if voting patterns fall along ethnic lines and insecurity shuts down stations in Pashtun areas.

Another concern is the integrity of the process. After the 2009 election, Karzai moved to take more direct control over the IEC and ECC, prompting warnings from critics and international observers that he was endangering the commissions' independence and credibility. In summer 2013, parliament passed new legislation, which Karzai signed, that created a consultative process for appointments designed to allay fears that the commissions would be overly beholden to the palace. Under the new process, the heads of both houses of parliament, the Supreme Court Chief Justice, the head of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, civil society organizations, and other officials nominate candidates to serve on the commission, and the

president appoints commissions from those nominees.[7] The new commissioners were duly appointed in September.[8] While the change does not guarantee a perfect process, it should be enough to alleviate critics' concerns—and is likely the best reform that can be achieved between now and the election.

Along with integrity, the process needs competence. Elections are one of the most challenging and complicated things a government can undertake. The 2004 and 2005 elections were administered mostly by the United Nations and other international personnel in recognition of the Afghan government's incapacity; in 2009, the Afghans led the process with heavy international oversight. In 2014, the Afghans will truly be in the driver's seat.

Surprisingly, there are already positive signs. The IEC finalized its operational plan in July, and the United Nations recently judged that "operational, including security, planning is further advanced than during previous elections."[9]

Challenges remain: There has still been no census in Afghanistan since 1979, despite the mandate for one in the original 2001 Bonn Agreement. Without an accurate baseline of the population, voter registration efforts are haphazard, vulnerable to fraud, and necessarily temporary: There will be no permanent and reliable voter registry until there is an accurate accounting of how many Afghans there are and how many live in each province and district. The census has been repeatedly delayed because of insecurity, lack of funding, and logistical challenges—and, perhaps, because rival ethnic groups fear to know for certain the actual size of their relative clout—and it is too late to hold one before the 2014 election. Until a census takes place, the voter registry will continue to be hampered, including through the reported buying and selling of surplus registration cards. Late last year, the IEC extended district-level voter registration by 45 days to compensate, and deployed mobile registration teams to find unregistered voters. The exercise registered more than 3 million new voters.[10]

The Candidates

If Afghanistan manages the security and logistical challenges well enough to hold an election, there is still the question of what the election might produce. Even the smoothest, most transparent and secure election will quickly be forgotten if it ushers in an incompetent or corrupt administration. For better or worse, the election will be judged by the quality of the candidates who run and, ultimately, the candidate who wins. Since Hamid Karzai appeared on the world stage in 2001 and seemed—in early years, at least—almost miraculously capable of holding the fractured country together, international observers have long wondered: Who might be the next president of Afghanistan?

The list of candidates (see table) is largely a roll call of prominent Pashtuns who have held high office in the post-Taliban government, including former defense minister Abdul Rahim Wardak, former finance minister Dr. Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, former National Security Adviser Zalmay Rassoul, former Nangarhar Governor Gul Agha Shirzai, former National Assemblymen Abdul Rasul Sayyaf and Qayyum Karzai (the president's brother), and former Vice President Hedayat Arsala. But the similarities

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Afghanistan's Presidential Contenders

Name	Ethnicity	Former Positions	Other Notes
Abdullah Abdullah	Tajik	Foreign minister	*Mujahedin*; medical doctor; second place in 2009 election
Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai	Pashtun	Finance minister	Western education; former World Bank economist; fourth place in 2009 election
Hedayat Arsala	Pashtun	Vice president	Western education; former World Bank economist
Qutbuddin Hilal	Pashtun		*Mujahedin*; former associate of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar
Qayyum Karzai	Pashtun	National assemblyman	Western education; president's brother
Sardar Mohammad Nader Naeem	Pashtun		Former king's grandson
Zalmay Rassoul	Pashtun	National security adviser	Western education; medical doctor
Abdul Rasul Sayyaf	Pashtun	National assemblyman	*Mujahedin*; accused of human rights violations
Gul Agha Shirzai	Pashtun	Governor, Nangarhar Province	*Mujahedin*; strong ties to United States
Mohammad Daoud Sultanzoi	Pashtun	National assemblyman; chairman, Economic Council	*Mujahedin*; former airline pilot
Abdul Rahim Wardak	Pashtun	Defense minister	*Mujahedin*; strong ties to United States

among the Pashtun officeholders are deceptive. Some—like Ghani, Rassoul, Karzai, and Arsala—are Western-educated technocrats and supportive of a broadly pro-reform, pro-Western agenda; others (e.g., Wardak) are former *mujahedin* fighters.

The Western-educated technocrats have struggled to build an indigenous political base for themselves. By having left the country during the Soviet and Taliban eras and enjoyed better opportunities than most Afghans had, they became outsiders. None of the technocrats is an automatic front-runner. Although Ghani received less than 3 percent of the vote when he ran for president in 2009, he led a recent public opinion poll about the candidates with 29 percent—probably because he tapped Abdul Rashid Dostum, a prominent Uzbek warlord and vote-broker, as a running mate.[11] Rassoul barely registered in the poll, but stands a good chance of establishing himself as the national unity candidate: He picked Ahmed Zia Masood (brother of the former Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Masood and an ethnic Tajik) as one running mate and Habiba Sarabi (the only woman on any ticket) as the other—although the election rules allow candidates to change their vice-presidential running mates before the election. Qayyum Karzai, despite his family connections, also fared poorly in recent polls. Prior to 2001, he was an American businessman and restaurateur, unlike his younger brother Hamid, who stayed to run tribal and family affairs from exile in Pakistan. Qayyum recently resigned his seat in parliament after reports of his frequent nonattendance surfaced. He is probably running to secure bargaining leverage and government jobs for the Karzai clan rather than out of any serious intent to win—a calculation probably shared by many of the lesser candidates.

The other major Pashtun candidates—Wardak, Shirzai, and Sayyaf—were *mujahedin* fighters against the Soviet Union in the 1980s but went in dramatically different directions after that.

Shirzai's real clout comes not from his former position as governor, but from a deeper root: He is an elder of the Barakzai tribe, from which the old monarchy came, and is a well-known warlord with strong ties to the United States (he was one of the first Pashtun leaders to ally with the United States in 2001). He is known to resent the loss of Barakzai influence—the Karzai family is from the Popalzai tribe—and he believes that Afghanistan is best governed with strong Barakzai leadership. Like Qayyum, he may be running more to gain leverage for his tribe and patronage network than from any realistic plan to win.

Sayyaf, another Pashtun warlord with *mujahedin* roots, hails from yet another part of the ideological landscape. He has the distinction of having invited and hosted Osama bin Laden when the latter moved to Afghanistan in 1996. Sayyaf was the most prominent Pashtun member of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance; according to rumor, he chose not to join the Taliban because he believed that he, with his master's degree from the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Cairo, should have led the Taliban movement instead of the relatively uneducated and uncredentialed Mullah Omar. Though he has publicly denounced the tactic of suicide bombing, Sayyaf has been named in connection with alleged war crimes and human rights abuses in the past, including the Afshar Massacre of February 1993.

Three other Pashtun candidates—Sardar Mohammad Nader Naeem, the former king's grandson; Qutbuddin Hilal, a member of the Islamist Hezb-I Islami party; and Mohammad Daoud Sultanzoi, a former airline pilot and member of the National Assembly—are extreme long shots to win but could influence the race's dynamics (and the postelection bargaining) in unpredictable ways.

Finally, there is the non-Pashtun alternative. Dr. Abdullah Abdullah—who is actually half Pashtun and half Tajik, though usually seen as a Tajik—won more than 30 percent of the vote in 2009 and represents a large and powerful coalition of Afghans who want to see a change from the Karzai-dominated political landscape of the past dozen years. The coalition includes ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks concerned that they are underrepresented in Kabul, some technocrats who believe the Karzai government has not made a priority of fighting corruption and the drug trade, and former Northern Alliance factions and women's and Shia groups concerned that a Pashtun-dominated government will compromise too much in its eagerness to reconcile with the Taliban. In 2009, Abdullah managed to articulate many of these concerns and wrap them up into a platform centered around devolution of power and a move toward a parliamentary system. His defeat and withdrawal in 2009 may have hurt his credibility: Only 25 percent of voters identified him as the best candidate in a poll late last year—actually the second-highest number of any candidate, but lower than his 2009 showing, suggesting he has work to do to shore up his base. History suggests that Abdullah's election would bring Afghanistan to an immediate crisis. Only twice in Afghan history—1929 and 1992—has a Tajik assumed leadership of the country. Both times resulted in civil war.

International Options

The international community faces a dilemma. Much rides on the Afghan election—for the world as much as for Afghans—but the election matters precisely insofar as it tests whether the Afghans can hold it themselves. If the international community does too much, it risks undermining what should be a test of Afghan autonomy. If

it does too little, there is a real risk of failure. However, considering the predisposition to withdrawal that has taken over the international project in Afghanistan in recent years, the risk of doing too little is probably the greater danger. Many international policymakers are convinced that they have no time, money, or political support to do much more for the country. To counteract the inertia toward disengaging from Afghanistan, the international community should look for areas where it can remain as engaged as possible through the election. This does not require reasserting control over Afghanistan's electoral process—there is little danger of the international community suddenly having too much political will in Afghanistan—but it does mean a sustained international presence in several ways. As Wilder rightly told Congress earlier this year, "Active U.S. support for a credible election bolsters Afghan sovereignty and reinforces the primacy of the constitution."[12]

The first, and most important, opportunity is to help secure the election. The Afghans have already assumed the lead for security across Afghanistan, but the international military forces still provide crucial assistance. For example, international forces provide logistics, airlift, medical evacuations, intelligence, and more to the Afghan forces. They also continue to train Afghan troops and undertake targeted counterterrorism operations against high-value targets. The Afghans should remain in the lead for security up to and on Election Day—but given the more demanding requirements for securing a national election, the international community should be prepared to step up its level of assistance, which could mean slowing the pace of troop withdrawals. There are about 90,000 international military personnel in Afghanistan today—roughly 60,000 U.S. troops and 30,000 allied troops. That is down 35 percent from the peak of 140,000 in 2011.[13] Current plans call for U.S. troop levels to be cut almost in half by Election Day, down to 34,000, with accompanying cuts to allied troop levels. These reductions, however, may leave the international community unable to help the Afghans consolidate their democratic transition. A sustained international presence at the current level of 90,000 troops, on the other hand, could be enough to help the Afghan security forces protect the last 4 percent of polling stations currently judged too dangerous to open.

The second way the international community can help the Afghan election is by supporting a neutral process—but that does not necessarily mean perfect neutrality among the rival candidates. Donors should not fund candidates or provide unequal material support or training to them, and the United States and the international community should not endorse a candidate or work, overtly or otherwise, for a preferred candidate's victory. But policymakers can and should start thinking through different scenarios. For example, while the international community might feel more comfortable continuing aid support with one of the technocrats in the palace, their lack of clout may mean that an Arsala or Ghani administration actually has a harder time passing legislation and commanding the army than the alternatives. Shirzai's election would likely be welcomed by tribal and traditional elements in Afghanistan and might help push negotiations with the Taliban forward, but he would not improve the executive efficiency of the palace and some observers would be concerned about the future of counternarcotics operations. Sayyaf's election would probably mean a dramatic reduction of donor aid to Afghanistan because of his past ties to Osama bin Laden, sympathy for the Taliban's ideology, and human rights record.

Rassoul and Wardak probably have the most balanced mix of traits, experiences, and credentials—Rassoul because he, like

Shirzai, hails from the royal tribe, and because he has a Western education (albeit as a medical doctor) and ministerial experience; Wardak because his *mujahedin* credentials and eight years as Minister of Defense make him most qualified to continue the counterinsurgency against the Taliban and counterterrorism cooperation against al Qaida, from both an Afghan and an international perspective. Wardak's election would pave the way for continued security cooperation with the West—and, for the same reason, might further sour the bilateral Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship. The United Nations and the major donor nations should not shrink from describing the consequences—for example, what would happen if Abdul Rasul Sayyaf were to win. The Afghan people will remain free to vote for him, but they deserve to understand that the international community will reevaluate its relationship with Afghanistan if the new president is someone widely accused of massive human rights violations and known to sympathize with al Qaida's ideology.

Finally, the international community should fully fund the election and send a full contingent of election observers and monitors—and carefully calibrate public statements about the election's legitimacy. Very few monitors were on the ground in Afghanistan for the 2004 election, which was widely hailed as legitimate largely because the Afghans accepted it. More monitors in 2009 meant more reports of corruption and fraud; unfortunately, international policymakers focused on reports of fraud rather than the process for investigating and responding to it, a self-defeating approach that created the perception that the election was hopelessly compromised. In 2014, the international community may not be prepared to fund as many observers and monitors. The international community spent some $200 million in 2009, but has committed only $130 million for 2014, a troubling sign that will result in fewer observers, among other things. Fewer observers would have the perversely positive effect of producing fewer reports of fraud—but would, in turn, make it easier for candidates to get away with unreported fraud. Instead, the international community should fully fund the election and should send as many observers and monitors as possible—but should exercise more patience before passing judgment on the election. It is unhelpful and naive for outsiders to respond with surprise and indignation at the first reports of fraud; such accusations are inevitable. What matters is how the Afghans respond to the accusations, and whether the process for adjudicating complaints retains its integrity—which means it could be weeks after Election Day before observers can deliver a measured judgment.

Conclusion

Afghanistan does not have a tradition of the peaceful transfer of power between living rulers. Most Afghan kings and emirs died in office, promptly setting off a short war among the monarch's surviving brothers, cousins, and sons for the throne. When they didn't die peacefully, Afghan rulers were assassinated (in 1933), or ousted by coup (in 1973 and 1978), tribal uprising (1929), revolution (1992), foreign invasion (1839, 1879, and 2001), or several of those combined (1979). If Hamid Karzai makes it through the next few months alive and hands over power peacefully to the winner of the election, he will rightly be hailed, whatever his flaws, for having broken precedent and establishing a new standard for Afghan leaders.

Despite that history, Afghanistan does have more experience with democracy than most outsiders realize. King Zahir Shah

introduced a democratic constitution in 1964 and oversaw reasonably free and fair elections in 1965 and 1969 of his own initiative without international pressure. Several prime ministers were voted in and out of office during the decade, and the parliament exercised real powers. Afghanistan's prior history with democracy should give international policymakers hope that the Afghans can pull it off. Despite the ongoing challenges with security, corruption, drug trafficking, poverty, and more, Afghanistan may yet emerge as a success, of sorts, for international reconstruction, development, and democratization.

Afghanistan's success will be the world's. A successful election would be a major blow to the Taliban and al Qaida, and would renew Afghan efforts to bring the war to a favorable conclusion. The defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan would be a major setback for similar groups worldwide, many of which look to Afghanistan as a sort of template for how to accomplish a jihadist takeover. By contrast, a failed election and a renewed push by the Taliban could become a rallying cry and a morale boost to the same groups.

More than the war against the Taliban and al Qaida is on the line, however. The international community has invested a massive amount of time, energy, money, and manpower in Afghanistan over the past dozen years. Because the effort has taken much longer and been more difficult than many expected, a spirit of resignation and even defeatism has taken hold among observers and critics, many of whom are ready to conclude not only that Afghanistan has failed, but that the entire effort was doomed from the outset because the very notion of international reconstruction, stabilization, and democratization is fatally flawed. In this view, outsiders have no realistic prospect of accomplishing anything of lasting significance in benighted countries like Afghanistan that are simply too far gone to help. If next year's election in Afghanistan fails and the country plunges into crisis and civil war, it could be a fatal blow to the international community's willingness to undertake peacebuilding efforts anywhere in the world for the foreseeable future.

Such cynicism is unwarranted—if for no other reason than that it ignores the recent history of successful international reconstruction efforts around the world. The international community has ended widespread political violence and restarted economic growth in places as far-flung as Namibia, Nicaragua, East Timor, Sierra Leone, Mozambique, El Salvador, Bosnia, and elsewhere since the end of the Cold War. Even setting aside that history, predictions of failure have a tendency to be self-fulfilling prophecies. If international policymakers conclude that they have already failed in Afghanistan, they are likely to be proven right—and critics will use that failure for decades to explain why interventions should never be undertaken in the first place. Such defeatism is irresponsible. While there is still time to influence Afghanistan's trajectory for the better—and there demonstrably is still time, though the window is closing fast—the United States and its partners and allies have a responsibility to give it one last push.

Notes

[1] Andrew Wilder, "Prospects for Afghanistan's 2014 Election," U.S. Institute of Peace, congressional testimony, May 21, 2013. As of January 24, 2014: http://www.usip.org/publications/prospects-afghanistan-s-2014-elections

[2] United Nations, "Report of the Secretary General on the Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security," S/2013/535, September 6, 2013, p. 14

[3] The Asia Foundation, "Afghanistan 2004: A Survey of the Afghan Electorate," July 2004, pp. 57–58. As of January 24, 2013: http://asiafoundation.org/publications/pdf/22

[4] Michael Bratton, "Second Elections in Africa," *Journal of Democracy,* Vol. 9, No. 3, 1998, pp. 51–66.

[5] United Nations, "Report of the Secretary General on the Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security," S/2013/721, December 6, 2013, p. 3.

[6] United Nations, S/2013/535, 2013, p. 4.

[7] United Nations, S/2013/535, 2013, p. 3.

[8] United Nations, S/2013/721, 2013, p. 2.

[9] United Nations, S/2013/535, 2013, p. 14.

[10] United Nations, S/2013/721, 2013, pg. 3.

[11] Matthew Rosenberg, "Polling Comes to Afghanistan, Suggesting Limit to Sway of President Karzai," *New York Times*, December 28, 2013. As of January 24, 2014: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/29/world/asia/polling-comes-to-afghanistan-suggesting-limit-to-sway-of-president-karzai.html?_r=0

[12] Wilder, 2013.

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