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At last, a ray of hope for Afghanistan

Whatever the final outcome, voters in Afghanistan's presidential election have delivered a powerful mandate



Michael Semple

The Guardian, Sunday 27 April 2014 13.40 EDT

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Afghan presidential candidate Abdullah Abdullah, front-runner to succeed Hamid Karzai. Photograph: Massoud Hossaini/AP

Provisional results from the [first round of Afghanistan's presidential election](#) look as if they will stand the test of tortuous fraud checks and complaint processes. Decisive margins make them robust. Although [Abdullah Abdullah, who emerged in the lead](#), has raised serious concerns about fraud, the first round should leave him facing Ashraf Ghani, a former finance minister, in a run-off.

Both Abdullah, a veteran of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, and Ghani say they are ready for the second round, as electoral law requires. But a winner-takes-all contest is not the only way this contest could end. Abdullah set a precedent in 2009 by pulling out of the second round. That allowed Hamid Karzai to be declared elected unopposed. This time, many Afghans expect a deal between the two leading candidates to form a unity government and avoid a second round. This would entail Abdullah and his running mates taking the presidential and vice presidential slots but drawing on the other campaign teams to form the new administration.

There are powerful reasons why a hybrid administration might be best for Afghanistan. It would be a case of collectively quitting while you are

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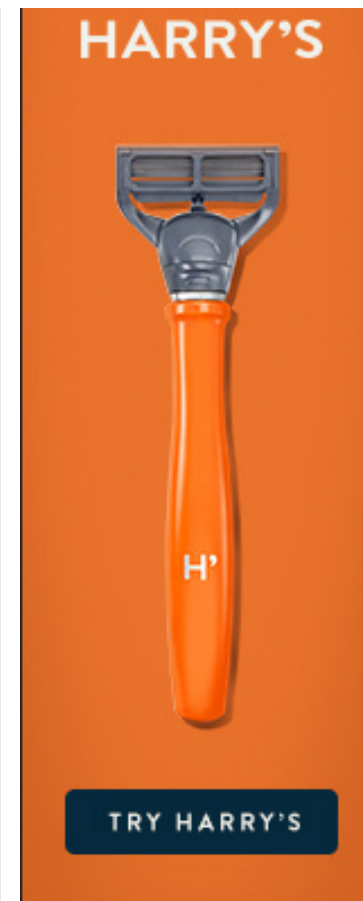


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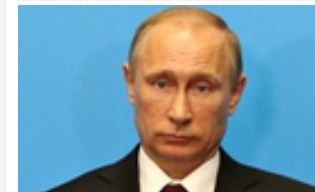


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ahead. The Taliban, after failing to disrupt the first round are delighted to get a replay in which they can inflict more damage. Countless election workers and security personnel will pay with their lives if Abdullah and Ghani fail to reach a deal.

The purpose of the election was to allow Afghans to choose a legitimate successor to Karzai. If Ghani endorses Abdullah, together they can claim the support of 75% of voters, far more than any sole candidate will ever obtain. There is a pluralism argument also. Afghanistan has four main ethnic groups, the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks. Both candidates deserve credit for campaigning in all regions, seeking cross-community support and articulating reform programmes. But on polling day, broadly speaking, Tajiks and Hazaras backed Abdullah and Pashtuns and Uzbeks backed Ghani. A run-off would become more divisively ethnicised, with Ghani obliged to rally the Pashtuns, undermining the idea of an inclusive administration with which all Afghans can identify.

Either candidate has the right to insist on the run-off – Ghani because he believes he can win or Abdullah to avoid coalition politics. Abdullah would start favourite. On a similar turnout he would need under 400,000 extra votes, attainable by attracting the supporters of either the number three or number four candidates. Ghani would need one million extra votes, equivalent to the total of both numbers three and four. For either of them and for the country as a whole, round two is a gamble.

Whether the election ends with a deal or after a run off, the six million votes cast this month constitute a powerful mandate. The voters' message contrasts with the bigotry underpinning recent violence. All major communities of the country want to be represented in the Kabul-based political system but want it cleaned up and reformed. They rejected the insurgents' authoritarian alternative and showed little interest in those hardline Islamists who stood. They want to keep Afghanistan's link to the west and an end to baiting its allies.

This calls for significant changes in how the country is run. But there will be tough bargaining within the Afghan elite before we see who gets to exercise the mandate. And the [five British soldiers' deaths in Kandahar](#)

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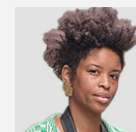
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over the weekend are a reminder of the high cost of the security umbrella which that elite has required to get this far.

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4 PEOPLE, 4 COMMENTS

Nietzschescat



27 April 2014 6:55pm

Jarring conflict between headline & text. The text makes a compelling case as to why a "democratic" outcome is highly unlikely. Why are we still getting this propaganda?



billygreene ▶ Nietzschecat

28 April 2014 12:12am

7

How is a democratic result unlikely?



error418 ▶ Nietzschecat

28 April 2014 6:51am

7

Not so. Headline and text see hope for Afghanistan because they voted despite the Taliban ban.

There **is** hope for Afghanistan **IF** the Pakistani ISI and other terror groups can stay out of Afghanistan.



Jawed Nader ▶ Nietzschecat

28 April 2014 4:16pm

Perhaps you should appreciate how democratic processes in conflict-ridden countries like Afghanistan work. Crudely, it doesn't work like the old democracies.

I talked to many Afghans who told me, they didn't vote for Abdullah or Ashraf. They voted yes for democracy and voted no to extremism. I think this 'essence of democracy' is well captured in this article.

It is a shame you think it is a propaganda.

Taku2

27 April 2014 6:57pm

3

Yes, a raw of hope it is, but we must hope that the competing forces in Afghanistan will negotiate and bring an end to the blood letting. At present, the chances are that the fighting will continue after the American and European forces leave Afghanistan, with the battle being between the government forces and the Taliban.

The outcome of the elections are important, but that is unlikely to bring an end to the fighting; as it is quite likely that the Taliban will simply ignore the outcome.

There is a lot of negotiations which need to take place, and the outcome of these might be more significant than the outcome of the elections, as the incoming administration cannot guarantee peace, and without peace, Afghanistan is not going anywhere.



Henrys_Cat

27 April 2014 7:01pm

1

he looks like dave gorman with hair.

3 PEOPLE, 3 COMMENTS



Ernekid

27 April 2014 7:03pm

8

I give it 6 months after international forces leave for this government to crumble and for civil war to break out amongst the Various Taliban Militias, Drug lords and various nee'r-do-wells in Afghanistan.

Afghan Democracy will only be a memory on the wind as forgotten as the Soviet backed Communist regime of the 1970s and 80s.



TGondii ▶ Ernekid

27 April 2014 7:06pm

14

Civil war can't break out six months from now. Civil war broke out in 1979 and never ended.



bangorstu ▶ ERNEKID

27 April 2014 9:59pm

12

the much derided ANA provided nearly all of the security for these elections.

Elections which the Taliban said they'd stop and yet somehow didn't...

7 PEOPLE, 10 COMMENTS



TGondii

27 April 2014 7:04pm

10

I asked an Afghan about their preferences in the last election and they replied, "Hamid Karzai is a corrupt man who only cares for himself and will damage the country to enrich himself and his family"

I said "So you support Abdullah Abdullah?"

"Oh no, he is far worse".

I'm surprised at the line "Decisive margins make them robust". Saddam Hussein always had decisive margins in elections, that's hardly a guarantee of democracy.



onestep ▶ TGondii

27 April 2014 8:41pm

9

but I bet you dollar that most Iraqees would rather have Saddam alive in Baghdad than the present situation of outright lawlessness!



Polana ▶ TGondii

27 April 2014 8:43pm

5

I may be wrong but I think Saddam had more control over the running of elections than Abdullah or Ghani do. (You may have the advantage over me here as I can't claim to have talked to any Afghans about this.)



TGondii ▶ Polana

27 April 2014 9:05pm

2

You're not wrong, but I think my point holds that a large majority is no

Show 7 more replies

Last reply: 28 April 2014 10:51am



ShockJock1

27 April 2014 7:18pm

Awrite Rasputin

2 PEOPLE, 2 COMMENTS



tutut

27 April 2014 7:37pm

1

If only the problems that the Afghanis faced were confined to Afghanistan. The arms and cash that have funded a variety of groups there does not come from the opium crop alone. If the same countries that funded the Taleban and others continue to do so, then the election results will not mean much at all.



Simon211 ▶ tutut

27 April 2014 9:02pm

1

Yes you will not solve the problems Afghanistan has by simply getting lots of people to make crosses on bits of paper for 18th century style assemblies.



naturalism101

27 April 2014 7:46pm

3

So the allied involvement and the nation building project this involved is leaving something valuable behind.

5 PEOPLE, 6 COMMENTS



RogerINtheUSA

27 April 2014 7:51pm

6

I suspect that there are many here who wish that the Taliban was still in power, sheltering al-Queda.



Simon211 ▶ RogerINtheUSA

27 April 2014 8:56pm

7

I suspect that there are many in the US who are going to trumpet their famous "not perfect but hey" routine again.

This is used to excuse every flop from lynching to Vietnam.

And if the warlords break out again the Taliban are going to look like the better option, as they did before.



BeatonTheDonis ▶ RogerINtheUSA

27 April 2014 10:04pm

3

Al-Queda is old news. It's al-Qaeda I'm worried about - and they've been sheltered and funded primarily by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

Fancy an invasion of those two countries?



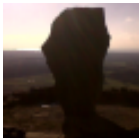
colinanon ▶ RogerINtheUSA

27 April 2014 11:32pm

Any chance you could give good solid evidence and name names rather

Show 3 more replies

Last reply: 28 April 2014 9:32am



precelticfringe

27 April 2014 7:59pm

2

a good report. thanks. the process looks positive.

lets hope our elections go as well next year and, like them, we have a mix of candidates who, in spite of flaws, have a track record of leadership and the potential to unite.



Unconstituted

27 April 2014 8:33pm

Brave men indeed.

Good luck to them.

3

2 PEOPLE, 2 COMMENTS



Simon211

27 April 2014 8:52pm

Great another ray of hope. All Afghanistan ever gets are fitfull rays of hope and then the bloody monsoon sets in again

4



imperium3 ▶ Simon211

28 April 2014 7:09am

It's just weird how he advocates the best way forward as the two main candidates packing it in and sharing the spoils between them as a victory for democracy.

Can you imagine if in the next election, regardless of the outcome the Tories and Labour formed a mega-coalition "in case there's another election and terrorists attack it"? Would Michael Semple write an article lauding that as a victory for democracy?

2 PEOPLE, 2 COMMENTS

alwaysconfused

27 April 2014 11:40pm

4

what a shit article, Abdullah Abdullah has spent most of his time in london and is as corrupt as one can get, what is the ray of hope, why does the media constantly lie about Afghanistan, it is a worse state than it was pre- 9/11



SoreHeed ▶ allwaysconfused

28 April 2014 7:07am

6

Worse than pre 9/11???? I'm sorry but don't make me fucking laugh.



colinanon

27 April 2014 11:41pm

Mr Semple, would you be able to give an informed breakdown of (potential) ministers and governors in the next government?

4 PEOPLE, 6 COMMENTS



TedMorgan38

28 April 2014 12:04am

6

Wishful thinking. The main aim of this election, as the last, is to provide legitimacy for a Kabul government whose influence doesn't extend past the "green line". When the referendum was conducted in Crimea, there was a chorus of dissenting voices complaining that "democracy" could not function under "the barrel of a gun". Russian military presence, apparently, made Crimean self-determination invalid. Has anybody noticed that Afghanistan is actually occupied? And unlike Russian presence in Crimea, that occupation is unwelcome? But, hey, this is the West doing the occupying, and as the West is universally recognised as being all sugar and spice, that means challenges to electoral legitimacy are ignored. Nice one.



Casgrave ▶ TedMorgan38

28 April 2014 2:20am

6

(and boycotted by most, with no international observers) plebiscite is comparable to Afghanistan trying to rid itself of a crumbled theocratic past is the same? The ISAF (and Afghan forces that detail security) are most certainly unwelcome by the Taliban who would like there not to be a vote. Therefore they try and murder their "own" to destabilize society.

But the West is to blame... A most solid example of whataboutery I've seen.



TedMorgan38 ▶ Casgrave

2

28 April 2014 2:35am

Bollocks? No.

Please tell me how you have determined that the referendum in Crimea was "boycotted by most". I know your claim is ridiculous, but perhaps you have some "truth" that is earth shattering.

With respect to Afghanistan, you underestimate Taliban popularity. Wishing them away has been a 13 year failing.

I don't like the Taliban.

Then again, I don't like the ConDems.

I've tried the Peter Pan method, and found it might save Tinkerbell, but isn't so efficient at saving... [insert favoured campaign here].

The bottom line is that Crimea has peacefully reintegrated with the country that the vast majority of its inhabitants wish to belong to.

Why is that so bad?



Casgrave ▶ TedMorgan38

1

28 April 2014 4:14am

95.5%? That looks like a legit number in a state filled with various

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Last reply: 28 April 2014 8:22am



WyldeWolfe

28 April 2014 2:15am

All hail the new Mayor of Kabul.

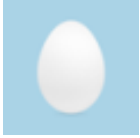


ytrewq

28 April 2014 2:47am

8

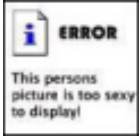
The Guardianista posters hoping for disaster as usual.



minmachen

28 April 2014 7:06am

hope against hope !!



cghorn

28 April 2014 7:08am

Until the majority of Afghans are properly educated, the taliban, muslim clerics, and the tribal chiefs between them will hold sway. These factions will try to keep the country forever in its backward state, and themselves in power.



NizwaNed

28 April 2014 7:20am

2

How can you believe there is hope for a country where corruption is endemic.

2 PEOPLE, 2 COMMENTS



SyedAkbar

28 April 2014 7:20am

11

Afghanistan is the longest running horror movie from the 20th century into the 21st century. It was not like this all the time. Until the 1960s and even into the 70s Kabul was the Paris of the East. Women were beautiful, they dined alfresco and listened to music and dancing. Music and dancing is not the measure of a progressive nation. It simply means that up to the 1970s Afghans had social freedoms and religious freedoms which they did not impose on their neighbours. People who sang and danced did not force their neighbours to do so. Obviously the people who did NOT

sing and dance were festering. Compounding the problem was the grinding poverty and illiteracy which divided the people. The Afghan leaders did not address their divides. They were also corrupt. The jihadists arrived and easily hijacked the entire agenda. What are the jihadists strengths? They use violence. They also speak the language of the poor - the language of ignorance. Like most muslim societies Afghan society has always been inherently devout. For Afghanistan, this means they will remain ignorant for a long while. This means the language of the poor will be spoken for a long time. The jihadists are the best speakers of this language. Ignorance will rule Afghanistan for a long time. For Afghanistan to progress, the people have to be isolated or separated from their devoutness, from their dubious religious beliefs. They need to be able to freely question, criticise and ridicule not just their leaders but their religious beliefs. This is more important. The ignorance has to go first. You dont need guns to achieve this. You need fearless and tireless debate.



londonhongkong ▶ SyedAkbar

28 April 2014 7:39am

3

an excellent comment piece. The fools in the West who see the jihadists as justified liberators of a country have no compassion.



londonhongkong

28 April 2014 7:37am

2

What's interesting about Abdullah^2, is that due to his background he is fiercely anti-Pakistan.

2 PEOPLE, 2 COMMENTS



StElme

28 April 2014 7:43am

1

Women and young girls... What future can they contemplate? "plus ça change..."



londonhongkong ▶ StElme

28 April 2014 7:47am

Better than if (or is it when) the Taliban get back into power.

2 PEOPLE, 2 COMMENTS



Musa1

28 April 2014 8:07am

1

Why are all the factors that influence a country so conveniently covered up in order to display the appearance of a functioning, normalized, stable country?

India funded the Northern Alliance when the Taliban were in power and India expanded its operations in Afghanistan under the Karzai era. The Afghan regime realizes its fate rests with continued funding, support, and alliance with India even if NATO leaves. And the alliance with India goes by way of Washington and London.

Those Afghans who put their personal interests and private fortune ahead of and ideology or belief system will continue to vote for the Indian backed Karzai Abdullah regime even if there is no foreseeable way of financing a 200,000 man army with modern weaponry. Thus, they will look outside, namely India and the West.

This is why Karzai signed an alliance with India, among other reasons.

If you are an imperialist who subscribes to the American form of imperialism (setting up subservient elites to run their countries with American interests as a priority), then I suppose there is a ray of hope in Afghanistan.



londonhongkong ▶ Musa1

28 April 2014 8:28am

2

You're correct to some degree. Though it's not just India involved in backing Karzai or probably Abdullah Abdullah, it's also the Iranians, the Uzbeks and maybe even the Russians. Arrayed on the other side backing the Taliban are the Pakistanis and their Gulf backers.

2 PEOPLE, 2 COMMENTS

PaulTibbets

28 April 2014 10:58am



Karzai will hot foot it to Switzerland within a few short years to spend more time with the money he has accumulated there.

It all stinks to high heaven.



Fahim Payabzai ▶ PaulTibbets

30 April 2014 2:36pm

1

ah shut T F up Pauly, u know nothing but hatred go and talk about ur own leaders. let us live in peace.



WyldeWolfe

28 April 2014 11:06am

1

This article has been here for quite some time now and has generated very little in the way of comments. I think the public has become weary of Afghanistan and that's a shame. It's a basket case.

I don't think the west is totally responsible although if my total comment history is on line you'd be able to see I've largely held the west accountable. Primarily as our bombing and invasion destroyed so much infrastructure. But not totally.

Weary we have moved on and no one really cares anymore. The Taliban aren't nearly defeated and enjoy a large degree of support. The opposing war lords also enjoy a large degree of support.

Weary we turn away as we did after the Soviets were driven out. Unable to learn the lesson from the last time that to ignore the issues in that country may well come back to bite us.

The people of Afghanistan deserve better. They do not deserve to be forgotten. They do deserve the right to chose their own future but these elections don't address that. They're a charade. Not a fiction. Not false. A charade as they don't really indicate a unified desire of the people.

We will leave them to it. Young people, children and women. We will focus elsewhere and not help them develop as a nation.

I am saddened by that. I truly am,

Rant off and sorry.

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