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TEIM Election Watch Analysis

PRE-ELECTION ANALYSIS:

AFGHANISTAN: Elections in the worst-possible scenario

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With one week to go before the Afghan presidential election, the predominant feeling on the ground is one of fear - of bombings and attacks against both polling stations and the population in general. The fact that security has worsened considerably as the election date - August 20th - approaches, and the Taliban's threats to carry out attacks, do not bode well for a peaceful election day. Of the country's 364 constituencies, some ten are under Taliban control, and 156 are considered to be under threat.

Polling stations will open from seven in the morning until four in the afternoon, and given the geography of Afghanistan, millions of people will have to travel far from their places of residence to exercise their right to vote. There will be 29,000 polling stations and 7,000 vote-counting centres. All ballots will be sealed and stamped at the polls, which will be numbered to guarantee transparency. First, the ballot boxes will be taken to the principal local polling centres, from where they will be transferred to the provincial capital and then on to Kabul. Votes will be counted after the polls close and the results are to be made public immediately after that process so as to ensure greater transparency. Another reason is that the security situation means that the ballot boxes transported to Kabul are not certain of arriving intact. Voter registration began on October 6, and although nearly 13 million Afghans registered, the registration process was carried out irregularly. In several of the more unstable provinces, especially those in the south (Wardak, Ghazni, Kandahar and Helmand), the registration of the whole population has been impossible. Tens of thousands of Afghans remain unregistered. For example, in the province of Paghman, the mobile units of the Afghanistan Independent Electoral Commission (AIEC) failed to reach all the constituencies. There are other districts or provinces, including Nangarhar, which have only now obtained the materials needed for the election to take place. Meanwhile the Taliban have threatened to attack road travel, saying that if they cannot convince Afghans not to vote, they will force them not to, even if that means blocking access to polling stations.

In these elections, Afghans are due to choose their President and provincial representatives. It is the country's second presidential election. In total, 39 candidates are competing for the job, two of them women. Initially, there were 41 candidates, but two withdrew in support of others. At first it was feared that the high number of candidates would be harmful and there was a tendency for those who were weaker to give up their candidacy in favour of a stronger one, but this did not convince most of those in the running. Competing to become provincial councillors, there are 3180 candidates, 10% of which are female. In some provinces, such as Kabul, Herat and Nangarhar there are so many registered candidates that the counting of the votes will be delayed until the following day. There is great interest in the general elections, and the campaign which began on 17 June is especially noticeable in the massive presence of posters and signs of candidates in the streets or anywhere. The campaign will end two days before election day.

The presidential competition really comes down to three candidates. The current president, Hamid Karzai, is standing for his first reelection, along with Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani. If none of them gets 50% in the first round, a second round will become necessary between the two candidates with the highest number of votes. The most controversial aspect of these elections, is the assumption that Karzai is sure to win. While he is certainly the candidate with the greatest possibilities, it is also true that he is presently at a delicate stage of his presidency, sorely affected by corruption. Several decisions by the President have been completely misguided, such as the appointment of certain warlords

(Muhammad Qasim Fahim and Abdul Rashid Dostum) to his election campaign. It also appears that he has been using state resources for his election campaign (helicopters, funds diverted to his campaign office...). Furthermore, Karzai has barely left Kabul, given the deteriorating security situation, and when he has done so, his security officers have hardly left him approach the crowds, limiting him to fleeting appearances. His staying safe in Kabul with high security measures, affordable only to someone of his ilk, has been widely criticised, especially while other candidates have campaigned with less media and security.

The other two candidates with some possibilities of success are Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani. Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, a Pashtun like Karzai, denounced the fact that at the beginning of the campaign he had received messages from Karzai to withdraw his candidacy. Although Karzai denied it, Ghani's claim was backed up by another candidate. He has also received the assistance of James Carville (Bill Clinton's adviser in 1992) as a campaign advisor and a visit by Eikenberry, the special US ambassador to Afghanistan (although Karzai saw this as interference in the campaign, Ghani was not the only candidate with whom Eikenberry met). Abdullah Abdullah, the former minister of foreign affairs, is another potential candidate. Nevertheless, according to a study conducted by the International Republican Institute, the most likely winner is Karzai, with 31% support, followed by Abdullah, with 7% and 2% for Ghani.