

## Widespread election fraud was easily preventable: Former UN official

By Peter Galbraith

Thursday, October 15, 2009



No one will ever know how Afghans voted in their country's presidential elections on August 20, 2009. Seven weeks after the polling, the UN-backed Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) is still trying to separate fraudulent tallies from ballots. In some provinces, many more votes were counted than were cast. EU election monitors characterize 1.5 million votes as suspect,

which would include up to one-third of the votes cast for incumbent President Hamid Karzai. Once fraud occurs on the scale of that which took place in Afghanistan, it is impossible to untangle.

Afghans perpetrated the fraud, and they are, of course, ultimately responsible for the consequences. They include the local election staff, government officials and local warlords and power brokers.

Afghanistan's Independent Elections Commission (IEC), a seven-member board appointed by Karzai to supervise the elections, was anything but independent. Its head met weekly with Karzai (but not with the other candidates), and the commission consistently made decisions that benefited the Karzai campaign.

Because the elections were so critical to political stability in Afghanistan – and, therefore, prospects for the US-led military mission – the US and its allies needed them to go smoothly.

The UN Security Council tasked the UN mission in Afghanistan to support the IEC and other Afghan institutions in the conduct of “free, fair and transparent” elections.

On two occasions, I started to take action that could have reduced the risk of fraud. In July, I learned that there were 1,500 polling centers (out of a total of 7,000) sited in places either controlled by the Taliban or so insecure that no one from the IEC, the Afghan Army or the Afghan police had ever visited.

It was obvious that these polling centers would never open on election day. They were also perfect vehicles for fraud. Since no observer, campaign representative or voter could go to the locations, it would be easy for the election staff – on its own or in collaboration with local officials – to say voting had taken place and then report a tally.

Along with ambassadors from the US, NATO, the EU and the UK, I urged the election commissioners and the Afghan defense and interior ministers to close down these ghost polling centers. Serving a president who was to benefit from the fraud, the Afghan ministers complained about my approach to my boss, Special Envoy Kai Eide, and he ordered me to stop.

On election day, these ghost polling centers produced hundreds of thousands of fraudulent votes for Karzai. After controversy erupted over my dismissal, the UN told some reporters that I wanted to disenfranchise voters by closing polling centers; this was absurd. The only ones I wanted taken off the books were ones that had never opened.

With support from UN election experts working within the commission, the IEC published safeguards to exclude obviously fraudulent ballots from the preliminary tally of election results. These guidelines were a matter of common sense. For example, they excluded results from polling centers that had never opened or that reported more votes than they had ballot papers. A week before the IEC was to announce the results, I learned that it was considering abandoning these safeguards. I called the chief electoral officer to express my concern. Within two hours, I found myself summoned to meet the foreign minister, who, on direct instructions from Karzai, protested my interference in the Afghan election process. At that time, however, my intervention was successful, and the IEC voted to keep the safeguards.

Days later, the IEC discovered that sticking to its published safeguards would exclude enough fraudulent Karzai ballots to keep his total below 50 percent. This would lead to a second-round runoff, which Karzai desperately hoped to avoid.

The IEC reconvened and voted 6 to 1 to drop safeguards, explaining that the commissioners had just read the Afghan election law and discovered that they had no authority to throw out fraudulent votes. This novel and inventive reading of the law did not convince many Afghans. Eide, however, sided with Karzai, and I was ordered to drop the matter. Four days later, I left Afghanistan and was subsequently relieved of my position by the secretary general.

So what should be done now? The UN raised \$300 million from the US and other Western countries to pay for the Afghan elections. The taxpayers from these countries surely expected the UN to spend their money on honest elections, not fraudulent ones. And countries sending troops to Afghanistan surely expected the UN to support elections that would put Afghanistan on a path to democracy and stability, not ones making the military mission incomparably more difficult. It is ridiculous to argue, as senior UN officials do now, that the UN had no authority to insist that the Afghan authorities conduct honest elections.

There is no easy solution to Afghanistan's election mess. If the ECC removes enough fraudulent votes, Karzai will fall below 50 percent, and there will be a second round of voting. However, the factors that caused problems on August 20 – ghost polling stations, corrupt election staff and a partisan commission – are still present. Dealing with those factors will require leadership that the head of the UN mission has yet to demonstrate.

If Karzai emerges the winner of the rushed and incomplete audit process now under way, Afghanistan's internal peace will depend on Karzai's opponents accepting – or at least tolerating – the outcome.

Karzai's main opponent, Abdullah Abdullah, has said publicly that he does not believe the UN's envoy is neutral. By failing to address the obvious fraud in Afghanistan's elections, the UN has lost credibility that is desperately needed for it to act as a postelection peacemaker.

Karzai's opponents are likely to be skeptical that the complaints process can change a fraudulent election into a good one. The US should focus on persuading Karzai to adopt some of the opposition's program, including arrangements for real power-sharing by Afghanistan's diverse ethnic groups.

Even so, Afghanistan's flawed elections have now become a major drag on US President Barack Obama's new strategy, which just six months ago seemed to offer real hope for that war-torn land. It need not have turned out this way.

***Peter W. Galbraith** served as deputy special representative of the secretary general of the UN in Afghanistan from June 1 to October 1, 2009. This article was first published in Time Magazine.*