

PRESS RELEASE - NEW AAN REPORT

Untangling Afghanistan's 2010 Vote; Analysing the electoral data

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Afghanistan's second parliamentary election, which took place on 18 September 2010, was surrounded by protracted controversy. Polling day was messy, as could be expected, but the real controversy centred on the audits and disqualifications by the two electoral bodies: the Independent Election Commission (IEC) and the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC). The result is an election outcome that appears to be at best somewhat random, and at worst considerably manipulated – and telling the difference is very difficult.

New research by AAN, to be released on Saturday, provides an overview of the publicly available electoral data and pieces together what happened to the vote after election day. It finds that although the IEC and the ECC released regular updates and large amounts of raw data, there is still little clarity on what exactly happened.

The IEC management was faced with a massive challenge. The absence of an adequate voter registry, the availability of millions of voter cards not linked to actual voters, and the lack of clarity on which polling centres opened, made the process difficult to control. In the period up to the announcement of the preliminary vote no solid information was provided on the number of votes involved: early count data was fluid, turnout figures fluctuated, and to this day no reliable figures exist on how many votes were cast or disqualified. When the preliminary results were announced, there was a large and unexplained discrepancy with the early turnout estimates. Van Bijlert: "It made the process rather amorphous. Not knowing how many votes you have to start with, means that you cannot properly track what happens to them."

The second phase of the count, the audits and disqualifications by the ECC, started out with the solid figures of the preliminary election results, but the process was soon muddied by a series of last minute and *ad hoc* interventions by the IEC. This included the addition of 511 polling stations that had previously not been counted. Van Bijlert: "The polling stations that were added contained over 45,000 votes. Half the provinces received between one and six thousand additional votes. This is enough to change election results." In at least four provinces significant discrepancies existed between the preliminary and final results, for which no documented interventions could be found. Several other provinces show minor but still unexplained discrepancies.

The IEC and ECC interventions had far-reaching consequences. Seven provinces saw 40 per cent or more of their polling stations not included in the final result (in the most extreme case, Nuristan, this was even 70 per cent). The IEC claims to have disqualified 1.2 million votes, which could represent around 20 per cent of the total. The ECC disqualified far fewer votes (probably under 300,000), but it targeted winning and almost-winning candidates and changed the composition of at least 10 per cent of the parliament. Van Bijlert remarks that although the protests against the results and the calls for investigations are obviously largely self-serving, it difficult to dismiss them as purely political or fabricated. "The process has become so muddled that it is by now impossible to argue that the election results are the logical outcome of how people voted, or had wanted to vote. On the other hand, further investigations are also not likely to lead to a more credible outcome."

The report shows that a thorough study of the available data does still not provide a full picture of the process. Van Bijlert: "There is a huge amount of electoral data available online, but it is incomplete, sometimes contradictory and often incompatible. It takes an enormous amount of time and energy to piece together the information and in the end you are left with only a rough idea of what happened and with quite a few question marks."

The report concludes that this is not just about a messy election; the controversy illustrates a more fundamental immaturity of the system. Van Bijlert: “Authorities are ill-defined. There is no centre of gravity. When there is a problem there is no agreed mechanism for arbitration and there is no power that is respected enough to have the final say.” In the past the international actors often acted as *de facto* arbiters and enforcers, but their influence and credibility has waned. They still however have a role to play. Van Bijlert: “The internationals are running out of time and patience, with the transition looming. But they should use whatever influence they still have – to simplify electoral procedures, particularly with regard to the count and the audits, and to strengthen independent institutions in time for the next election.”

Martine van Bijlert is co-director of the Afghanistan Analysts Network. She has spent over 11 years, since the early 90s, working in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan – as researcher, diplomat and aid worker. She has an extensive list of publications on Afghanistan. The 2010 vote was her fourth Afghan election.

The **Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN)** is a non-profit, independent policy research organization. It aims to bring together the knowledge and experience of a large number of experts to inform policy and increase the understanding of Afghan realities. For further information, please visit www.aan-afghanistan.org or email info@afghanistan-analysts.net.

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