

the weekly
Standard

One Afghan, One Vote

The U.S. ignores election fraud in Afghanistan at its own peril.

by Richard Williamson

09/22/2009 3:00:00 PM

Will the Obama administration give Afghanistan a pass on credible allegations of material fraud in its recent election? We don't know yet. But it shouldn't.

In Afghanistan's recent Presidential election there have been credible allegations of voter registration cards for sale, stuffed ballot boxes and other irregularities. The European Union has said up to one-third of the ballots may be tainted. America should not demand that we find a Thomas Jefferson amongst the chaos in Afghanistan. We're still looking for another Jefferson in America. But the human right of self-determination and the rule of law are abandoned at our own peril.

Democracy is not just a rhetorical gimmick, an idealistic aspiration or a July 4th punch line to be marginalized or eclipsed by political "spin" or coarse pragmatic opportunism. Democracy is a way to allocate power in a manner that encourages inclusion and compromise. It is a process in which there are no final victories so losers can accept today's judgment knowing they will have the opportunity to contest for power on a future date in a free and fair process.

And the rule of law is a means to peacefully adjudicate conflicts. All societies have competing interests, disputes, disagreements. In Afghanistan, a country at war with itself for 30 years, the disputes are bitter and the elbows are sharp. The rule of law allows their resolution in an open, transparent, fair process based upon established and recognized criteria rather than by personality, position, privilege and power. So the judgments are accepted.

In the march of freedom, history, heritage and habits matter. Not all soil is immediately hospitable to the institutions, processes and practices of democracy. Transitions can be difficult and take time. Therefore, notwithstanding the universal desire for freedom and the desirability and durability of democracy in allocating power and adjudication disputes, especially within diverse societies, patience, institution-building and various intermediary steps may be required. A country needs to develop a vibrant civil society, establish a free press, pass laws guaranteeing the right to assemble and so on. The pace of progress in any given circumstance may be a legitimate topic of debate.

In Afghanistan, promises have been made, expectations have been raised, commitments have been proffered. To deny the apparent material fraud in Afghanistan's recent presidential election is for America to break those promises, shatter those expectations, and breach those commitments. It will permanently damage America's credibility, lower Afghanis' horizons, and complicate the already immensely difficult challenges in Afghanistan.

I was in Kabul for the August 20th presidential election as leader of the International Republican Institute's Election Observer Mission. The environment of insecurity suppressed voter turn out; nonetheless millions of brave Afghanis went to the polls. At one polling station Mohamad Daud told me, "We had more participation last election. People are feeling fear. But people are voting. That is

good for my country." In the Habibia High School polling place Abdul Wali caught the hopes of many Afghans when he told me, "For the last 30 years we were so scared. Now, even though there are bombs, there is less fear. The big difference from the last 30 years is that now people have the right to vote. We are choosing our own government. It is our responsibility to vote. It is the government's job to be fair."

"I grew up with brutal war," Abdul Sami, a 48 year old printer, told me. "People are more hopeful now. The international community is here. . . . People will accept the results of this election. The vote is between me and my God. And the vote count will be transparent. So life will be better for my children."

The challenges in Afghanistan are considerable, progress will be difficult and take time. But, for whatever reason, if America diverts its eyes from credible allegations of large-scale election fraud in the belief that such a betrayal will achieve a measure of short term stability, we will have lost our way and undermined our interests and the future of Afghanistan.

For sustainable stability, a prerequisite for progress, Afghanistan needs the rule of law. To sanction the trespass of the rule of law by embracing fraudulent election results will betray Afghans, encourage rule by patronage and power, and diminish American's influence. To deny democracy we have promised and promoted will reaffirm allocation of power by ethnicity, division and lawlessness; the very patterns that must be broken if stability is to be achieved and progress is to be realized. We must keep faith with the hopes and courage of brave Afghans such as those I saw and listened to on election day. President Obama should speak out forcibly against election irregularities, as the Europeans already have done. He should demand a transparent adjudication of election complaints. If the election is deemed fatally flawed by material fraud, President Obama should support a new vote. By standing for the rule of law we will stand up for the Afghan people.

Ambassador Richard Williamson most recently served as President Bush's Special Envoy to Sudan.