

Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

## ***CONNECTING WITH KABUL***

---

The Importance of the *Wolesi Jirga* Election  
and Local Political Networks in Afghanistan



AREU Parliamentary Election Brief 1  
By Noah Coburn



May 2010

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction .....	2
2. Perceptions of Parliament and Parliamentarians .....	3
3. How the Local Political Landscape Shapes Views about MPs.....	6
4. Why the Parliamentary Election Matters for Local Communities.....	8
5. What this Means for the 2010 Election .....	10
6. Conclusion .....	12

This study was partially funded by the Foundation of the Open Society Institute (FOSIA).

About the author: Noah Coburn is a socio-cultural anthropologist in Kabul with the United States Institute of Peace. He received his doctorate from Boston University after researching local political structures, conflict and democratisation in Afghanistan from 2006-2008. He has a MA from Columbia University in New York.

Acknowledgements: The author would like to thank all the participants who gave their time to take part in this study. He is also sincerely grateful to the research team of Mohammad Hassan Wafaey, Farid Ahmad Bayat, Zahir Seddiqqi, and Anisa Nuzhat for their invaluable contribution to this project. Finally, he would like to thank AREU's Paula Kantor, Anna Larson and Jay Lamey for their time and support in producing this paper.

Editing and layout by Jay Lamey.

Cover Photograph: The ceremonial opening of the Khas Kunar Truck Bridge in Kunar Province on 5 November 2009. Present are an MP and a Senator, as well as a local community representative, the provincial governor and the provincial police chief. Taken by Tech. Sgt. Brian Boisvert of the Kunar Provincial Reconstruction Team and reproduced under a Creative Commons 2.0 license.

© 2010 Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit. Some rights reserved. This publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted only for non-commercial purposes and with written credit to AREU and the author. Where this publication is reproduced, stored or transmitted electronically, a link to AREU's website ([www.areu.org.af](http://www.areu.org.af)) should be provided. Any use of this publication falling outside of these permissions requires prior written permission of the publisher, the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit. Permission can be sought by emailing [areu@areu.org.af](mailto:areu@areu.org.af) or by calling +93 (0)799 608 548.

## 1. Introduction

There is a renewal of interest in the lower house of Afghanistan's parliament, known as the *Wolesi Jirga*, taking place in both Afghan domestic politics and international discussion about governance in Afghanistan. This is particularly in the wake of the house's rejection of a significant number of ministerial nominees, its opposition to President Hamid Karzai's recent election decree and its initial refusal to ratify the national budget. With an evolving relationship with the executive branch, and elections currently scheduled for 18 September 2010, there are many questions about the role of the *Wolesi Jirga* in national and local politics that have not been considered carefully enough. And despite widespread concern about fraud and corruption during the 2009 presidential and provincial council elections, there is little consensus on what lessons were learned from those elections or what parliamentary elections mean for politics in Afghanistan.

While the international community focuses on procedural aspects of the upcoming elections,<sup>1</sup> this preliminary study suggests that, on a local level, many Afghans are concerned about how parliamentary elections will play out for very different reasons. In fact, interviewees have tended to de-emphasise the role of corruption and questions of government legitimacy and procedure, which dominate much of the current discussion of the election in the international press.<sup>2</sup> Instead, those questioned tended to focus on the role of parliamentarians as important members of local patronage networks who provide some of the few real opportunities for communities to connect with the funding opportunities available in Kabul.

This paper argues in particular that the international community needs to pay more attention to the upcoming parliamentary election—not only for the precedents it will set in attempts to promote representational governance in Afghanistan, but, more pressingly, because of the ability of parliamentary elections to stimulate local political debate and reshape local political networks across Afghanistan in a meaningful manner. It suggests several broad measures that the Afghan government and the international community should take to better concentrate their efforts to support more active, local and democratic political debates.

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is conducting ongoing research on how Afghans in three provinces perceive and interact with members of parliament (MPs) and how MPs are interacting in parliament in the run-up to the 2010 election. As part of this project, this paper focuses only on local perceptions of MPs. It is based on over 100 interviews and discussion groups in seven districts in Paktya, Kabul and Balkh Provinces. Interviews were conducted across these three provinces, but were focused on the districts of Qara Bagh and Istalif in Kabul, Ahmad Abad and Gardez in Paktya, and Balkh, Dihdadi and Kaldar districts in Balkh Province. Interviews were with local elders, district-level officials, parliamentary candidates and voters, and efforts were made to reach all sectors of the population, including women. Information was also drawn from 53 interviews with MPs conducted for a parallel study of internal parliamentary politics. Additionally, it builds on several months of research and 200 interviews conducted around the presidential and provincial council elections in August 2009, which formed another component of AREU's ongoing research into representative governance in Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup>

---

1 Two good examples that include well thought-out recommendations for election reform are Democracy International, "Consensus Recommendations for Electoral Reform in Afghanistan" (April 2010) and Scott Worden, "Delays Will Not Improve Afghan Elections" (Washington, DC: USIP, February 2010).

2 For example, see "United Nations Endorses President's Choice to Lead Election," *New York Times*, 17 April 2010, and "Afghanistan Kicks off Registration for Election," *AFP*, 20 April 2010.

3 AREU papers on the 2009 elections were Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, "Patronage, Posturing, Duty, Demographics: Why Afghans Voted in 2009;" Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, *Voting Together: Why the Afghan*

This paper highlights some of the initial issues that AREU researchers have uncovered and considers how these could shape understandings of the upcoming parliamentary elections. It begins by outlining some of the basic perceptions about parliament and parliamentarians that emerged from interviews, then discusses why the elections of 2010 will impact local communities, and finishes by analysing some of the implications for these elections. A more detailed study of how parliamentarians relate to local political structures is scheduled for release before the election.

## 2. Perceptions of Parliament and Parliamentarians

There are several parallels between early local discussions about candidates and campaigns for the September 2010 parliamentary election and those that occurred around the presidential and provincial council elections in 2009, such as the competition among tribes, *qawms*<sup>4</sup> and other groups to mobilise politically at a local level. The key difference in 2010, however, is that a significant number of voters see this election as having much more potential to seriously impact local political and economic conditions. This is because MPs are ideally perceived as having the ability to bring resources to their community from the national government and international community. How effective MPs are in doing this is actively debated. While many respondents felt they were not being adequately represented by their MP, in each of the research sites there was still the implicit assumption that their MP should be working for their supporters, an element that is missing from discussions about other political figures, such as provincial council members. This has already led to significant debate over who will run and the candidates that various groups will support, despite the election still being four months away.

While parliamentarians are technically government officials, in the eyes of many of those interviewed they are first and foremost members of local networks, which are often based on patronage and include formal and informal leaders, such as *maliks*,<sup>5</sup> commanders, district governors and religious figures. The widespread series of interconnecting political and economic relationships take many forms in Afghanistan, but are often reinforced through marriage, business, friendship, and other social and economic ties. They are created in part by the emphasis in local politics on personal relationships rather than on legal-rational, bureaucratic authority in the Weberian sense. The electoral success of MPs often comes from their ties to local leaders and these leaders in turn tend to benefit from the increased ties to Kabul. This means that while MPs have government positions, most interviews with both voters and MPs describe their authority as still based on local relationships. Highlighting this reliance on personal connections, one of the candidates in the upcoming election from Kabul was referred to in dozens of interviews as “the son of [a local *wakil*],” with few of the interviewees even knowing the candidate’s own name.

In the eyes of many interviewees, it is the duty of these local figures and their allied MPs to ensure that government funds and international support reach the community. The

---

*Elections of 2009 were (and were not) a Disaster*; and Noah Coburn, “Losing Legitimacy? Some Afghan Views on Government, the International Community, and the 2009 Elections.” All are available at [www.areu.org.af](http://www.areu.org.af).

4 *Qawm* is a complex Afghan political and social term which is often too simply translated as “tribe” or “clan.” Based upon the context in which it is used, it can mean an identity group ranging in scope from family to ethnicity.

5 *Maliks* are local community leaders in rural areas, who liaise in a quasi-official capacity between the community and the government. In some areas a malik is referred to as a *qaryadar* or *arbab*, and all can have varying roles in different political contexts.

6 *Wakil* means “representative.”

result is a tendency for interviewees to judge an MP based upon whether they feel they have received resources, particularly development projects, through these networks. If not, they were likely to have extremely negative views of their local parliamentarian. If so, and this was true in a much lower percentage of cases, they were likely to have an extremely positive view.

Thus, responses such as “‘parliament’ is only a word in this country; they are not actually doing anything for us,” as one man in Balkh told researchers, were common. Another man said: “I have been living here for five years, but have only heard the name of the representative for parliament. I have never seen what he looks like or what he has done for this place.” Others, who felt that MPs were not only ineffective but had stolen funds marked for their areas, made more extreme statements, such as one man who stated that “MPs only drink the blood of the people.” This statement was also used in other interviews to refer to commanders who use their positions for personal gain as opposed to creating opportunities that reach community members more equitably.

Interviewees who felt that their parliamentarian had helped deliver concrete goods tended to echo the statement of this woman from Balkh: “Our relationship is very good with our MPs and whenever we are faced with a problem related to them, they respond well...[Our MP] made roads, schools and literacy courses for women.” Many of those who spoke positively of their MPs praised the effectiveness of the patronage network more than the MP himself. For example, as one voter described, “There is a good connection between parliament and our community because our MP has always tried to be like a bridge between people and parliament. He is not directly in contact with the people because he is busy with his work in parliament, but people contact him through his brother because he is the head of the district *shura* (council) and the *shura* is an organisation that people can contact very easily. People generally go to the *shura* to transmit their problems to our MP.” More frequently, however, respondents complained about the lack of connection that they had with MPs and other local political figures.

In addition to bringing resources or benefits back to a community, parliamentarians are often seen as important for their ability to link communities to services or influence available in Kabul. While oftentimes much more complicated, respondents often described the process as an ideal type, with an individual first approaching his local *malik* who then joins with other influential elders to bring the problem to the MP (or, as the case may be, to the district governor). Successful MPs provide constituents with access to ministers, embassies and other officials. Respondents gave examples of MPs securing them passports, certificates of refugee status and other government documents, including exemptions from exams from the Ministry of Higher Education. This means that the ability of an MP to create their own network among elites in Kabul is particularly important. MPs are clearly aware of this need, as described by one from Balkh: “The MP who has good networks is more effective than others because MPs must meet individually with ministers if they wish to solve problems.”

Of course, political networks in rural Afghanistan are not strictly about resource or service provision. They are also about social relationships, marriages and religious obligations. Many interviewees interacted with their MPs primarily when they returned to their homes for social rituals, such as weddings and funerals. Some MPs were praised for fulfilling traditional roles, such as holding feasts for the community and being involved in local dispute resolution. One MP in Kabul was widely considered an important figure in community-based dispute resolution in his local area. Several respondents discussed how he was called in after a girl and a boy from two different *qawms* eloped together.

The girl's family were threatening to kill members of the boy's family until the MP held a gathering at which the family agreed to compensation instead.

This view of MPs as deeply entrenched in local networks contributes to the fact that MPs are not discussed by constituents as a part of the government, but as a counterbalancing group that can sometimes help the individual access the government. This echoed the way that MPs spoke about their own position vis-à-vis the government.<sup>7</sup> Most respondents used the term "government" to refer to the executive branch and saw parliament as an opposing force to executive power. For those interviewees who tended to oppose the government of President Hamid Karzai, parliament provided one of the few ways to challenge the status quo. This condemnation was strongest in non-Pashtun areas, but criticism of the national government was still high in all districts where interviews were conducted. Many Karzai supporters who nevertheless disparaged the weakness of the central government saw the divide between parliament and the executive as limiting the effectiveness of the government. A significant number believe that the international community causes this weakness. One student stated:

The government is the father of a country and parliament is a member of that family. Generally, a member of the family follows the father in what he is doing, but actually our father is only working for the interests of the international community. This is the main reason for the gap between parliament and the government. If the government [i.e. the executive branch] wants to have a good relationship with parliament, first it should act independently [from foreign influence].

Within local communities, voters often directly compare the ability of various local figures to deliver resources, and the choice of who to turn to in a time of need is an important political decision at the centre of many local debates. In some areas there are clear patterns in who provides which services. In other cases, however, there is clear competition and public debate over which local leaders or MPs are most effective at mobilising political capital and, for example, contacting NGOs working in the area. One man from Kabul described his experience: "I called the MP, but he did not respond to me, so I decided to take my own path, the more effective and clear path in our area. I went to the *qaryadar*<sup>8</sup> and I was able to solve my problem in this manner." Another man stated:

Maliks are more effective than the MP from [our district] because maliks are selected from among people, they are always among people and they have always been like a bridge between people and the district government. People can contact their malik more easily than their MP and their malik always transmits their problem to district government or any other organisations.

The result is that MPs simultaneously work with and compete for local influence against figures such as commanders, maliks and other elders. Maliks and other local leaders use MPs for their ability to tie into national-level patronage networks, while MPs use these local leaders to mobilise their political base. The effectiveness (or lack of effectiveness) of MPs and other local political figures creates some of the most meaningful local political debates, with many respondents eager to compare different figures and methods for accessing the national government. These debates are less visible in areas where these networks are more fixed by the strength of tribes or ethnicity-based political parties (such as Paktya and Balkh, respectively) than in areas where the roles of commanders, government officials and local elders are in more flux and locally debated (such as Istalif, Qara Bagh and Dasht-i-Barchi in Kabul).

---

7 For more on this see Mohammad Hassan Wafaey's forthcoming AREU paper on parliamentary dynamics in Afghanistan (due for release in June 2010).

8 See Footnote 5.

As the election approaches, current MPs and potential candidates are working to gain allies in order to secure more votes, while local leaders are attempting to secure as many resources as possible for their communities. This is done both through mobilising voters and using political relations to manipulate the vote through fraud. Interestingly, while most respondents complained about fraud nationally, far fewer felt there had been significant fraud in their area. Furthermore, instead of delegitimising candidates, in some instances the ability to use political connections within the Independent Election Commission (IEC) in particular was seen as evidence of the political strength of the candidate, further demonstrating why they should represent the community.

The relationship between MPs and local patronage networks raise some interesting questions about the size and shape of political communities in Afghanistan today. There is a tendency to speak of districts as the most important local political unit because many large-scale development projects are currently being implemented on a district level. Therefore, despite the fact that MPs are elected by provincial electorates, many interviewees spoke of them as representatives of a specific district.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, competing networks of local elders and commanders within a district often support opposing candidates. This is particularly the case in districts more divided along ethnic lines (e.g. Qara Bagh in Kabul) or party lines (e.g. many districts in Balkh). For the most part, interviewees described political communities in Afghanistan by the reach of a specific patronage network, or by two or more directly competing networks in the case of more divided areas. At the same time, however, networks are constantly reshaping themselves. For example, recent land disputes in Qara Bagh have reshaped many local political relations, while at the same time local political leaders have worked in the past decade to expand their connections to international NGOs. This means that while those people who consider themselves a certain political community in Afghanistan may appear momentarily stable, in reality the evolving political context will affect who considers themselves a part of a certain network at a certain time.

### 3. How the Local Political Landscape Shapes Views about MPs

Despite the constant presence of political networks based on both patronage and reciprocity, there are clear differences in the relationship between MPs and constituents in each of the provinces where interviews were conducted, which tend to reflect the different forms that political networks can take on in different regions in Afghanistan. MPs in Paktya are a part of tribal structures and in some ways are extensions of tribal networks into the central government, at least more so than in other areas. In Balkh, however, where Governor Atta Mohammed Noor is the dominant political force, an MP's ability to deliver resources is closely tied to that MP's relationship with him. One interviewee said: "These days our environment is controlled by Atta. He is the only person. All of the MPs are controlled by Atta and they have a good relationship with each other. All of the high and beautiful buildings that you can see belong to them." Finally, in Qara Bagh and Istalif in Kabul Province, where local warlords continue to play a key role in the quiet struggle between Tajik and Pashtun groups in the area, it is the MP's shifting relationships to these commanders and related figures that is often central to shaping their power.

In turn, as might be expected, an individual's loyalties in an area do much to shape how they describe the politics within their community and judge political leaders and

---

<sup>9</sup> For more on this see Anna Larson, *Toward an Afghan Democracy* (Kabul: AREU, 2009) and Wafaey's forthcoming AREU paper on parliamentary dynamics.

their contributions. For example, there has been a recent project in Qara Bagh that has brought water through a canal from Charikar, increasing the amount of agricultural land in the area. The district governor, local MP, local provincial council member and several other influential elders were all variously involved in negotiating the rights to the water with the Charikar community, cleaning and rebuilding the canal, and working to create a system that shared the water equitably once it reached Qara Bagh. It seems that the MP was primarily responsible for securing funds for the project from the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, while the provincial council member was key in resolving many of the disputes over access to the new water. Determining the details of the process, however, was surprisingly difficult for researchers, with many contradicting reports about the roles that certain figures had played. In interviews there was a clear tendency to give credit entirely to one figure or the other. As a result, those who favoured the MP gave him exclusive credit, while those with ties to the provincial council member tended to favour him in their accounts, creating dueling narratives that describe (and in many ways also confer) political authority.

It is also clear that these patronage networks are shifting and adapting to changing political and economic conditions in the post-Taliban period. In some areas, figures who have been able to deliver international aid have grown in stature in comparison to commanders who are able to mobilise militias, while in areas with more tension, militia leaders have retained a higher degree of their influence.

With the approach of the second parliamentary election since 2001, MPs will increasingly be judged on what they have been able to deliver for their communities. As one voter in Mazar-i-Sharif stated, “Before the election we had a good relationship with the MP candidates, but after the election we do not know what they have been doing...I have witnessed them building modern houses for themselves, but not serving the people.” In some instances, MPs themselves are concerned how their delivery of resources (or failure to deliver resources) will play out in the coming election. One MP from Balkh stated, “Our mistake was making promises to people. Before the election I promised a lot of things to people, but unfortunately we could not implement many of these programs and we have lost the trust of the people.”

In general, however, personal relationships are still the most important aspect of local politics. Individual ties with local elders and maliks are often based upon marriage, land use and business. As long as these ties continue to have economic and political import in the daily lives of voters, there is little incentive for these voters to approach other networks with which they do not have such intimate relationships. One business owner, who is from the same qawm as an MP, said “[He] and I are good friends and were classmates together for 12 years, but I must confess that there is no service done by him in our community,” but later concluded that he was still planning to vote for him. Responses from interviewees suggest that, in the long term, there are possibilities for political shifts as certain networks prove more effective at mobilising an array of economic and political resources. As this happens, maliks and their constituents will slowly shift their group’s support to those networks that appear to be stronger locally. Most interviews suggest that such shifts will be slow, with few respondents describing significant changes in their political loyalties over the past ten years. Despite this, the upcoming elections promise to be an important public test of the strength of many of these networks, which is often lacking in muted local political debates.

## 4. Why the Parliamentary Election Matters for Local Communities

The upcoming parliamentary election is important for local politics in Afghanistan and will continue to set precedents for democratic processes in Afghanistan. The vote can serve to solidify processes such as campaigning and demonstrate locally the power of political parties, ethnic groups and tribes, as similarly occurred during the presidential and provincial council elections of 2009.<sup>10</sup> Beyond this, however, parliamentary elections can seriously influence local politics in Afghanistan because they represent one of the few opportunities for communities to gain or lose representation with the national government and international community in Kabul, and this has and will continue to create an opportunity for significant public debate.

As the 2010 elections approach, it is important to note:

- **Communities with MPs receive more national and international support**

While no conclusive studies have been conducted, there is a clear perception that a community with a member in parliament is likely to benefit more from both government and international funds. Significant anecdotal evidence supports this belief, driving much of the local interest in the upcoming elections.

- **Local struggles will play out publicly in elections**

As a result of the perceived benefit of having an MP representing a community, there are remarkably public struggles going on between competing networks of elders and commanders within and between communities, even before campaigning has officially begun. As in the 2009 elections, there is already a good deal of discussion in bazaars, schools and other public spaces, and this interest seems strongest in research sites where there is the most factionalising and tension exists between local groups. This is significant in local Afghan politics, where there is a high premium on secrecy, deception and the veiling of motives, and few public political forums—many respondents expressed their frustration with a political system where many decisions are made during closed door negotiations between people such as the district governor and a few significant elders. Also, 30 years of instability and conflict, the lack of a serious reconciliation process, and the current period of increased stability maintained largely by the presence of international troops have produced a situation in which tensions between local political groups and networks are often suppressed by the fear of intervention by military forces. These elections will give candidates a public forum in which to discuss serious local political issues, which has the potential to encourage democratic debate but also to highlight political tensions. Louis Dupree described a similar pattern in the parliamentary elections of 1965 and 1969, when feuds intensified as “ethnic groups or factions within groups” brought “their differences to the ballot box.”<sup>11</sup> In several research sites, the 2010 election is already generating more interest than the 2009 elections because their focus is more local, creating debate on provincial and district issues that have a more significant impact on people’s lives.

- **Candidates are likely to reflect a wider mix of community leaders and commanders**

Interviews suggest that a wider array of local political figures will run in the upcoming elections. There were questions in 2005 about the role of the *Wolesi Jirga* and how

---

<sup>10</sup> See Coburn and Larson, *Voting Together*, for a discussion of issues motivating participation and political debate in the 2009 elections.

<sup>11</sup> Louis Dupree, “Afghanistan Continues its Experiment in Democracy: The Thirteenth Parliament is Elected,” American Universities Field Staff, *South Asia Series* XV, No. 3 (1971), 10.

beneficial a position on it would be for members. Conflict-era commanders in multiple research sites, who potentially had more concerns about prosecution in 2005, have now decided to stand for election and are attempting to use other economic and political resources to maintain their influence. As one voter said, “In the past commanders were leading people using their weapons, but now they are leading people by using their positions in NGOs and Afghan organisations.” Similarly, there was an increase in the number and influence of candidates between the parliamentary elections of 1965 and 1969, as a wider array of local notables joined in the process.<sup>12</sup>

- **Elections demonstrate the strength and honour of certain groups**

For many respondents, successfully electing a candidate to parliament is not simply about the material rewards of having a figure in such a position; it is the fact that it elevates the community in the eyes of others in the area. Indeed, while patronage networks are about the ability to secure certain resources, they are also about maintaining honour and a certain status in a community. One of the ways that respondents tend to measure the strength of their MPs and the resulting honour they bring to their constituents is through their ability to access the media. For several voters, an MP’s appearance in the media demonstrated the political strength of the community, and a failure to appear in the press in turn demonstrated the weakness of the community. (One Balkh student linked media visibility with political effectiveness, complaining: “Up to this point, we have not seen any MP from this area raise the problems of the people in parliament and they never talk to the people through the media.”) These elements of reputation and honour will become more acute after the election because tallies are released by polling station and can thus reveal the relative strength of local groups, including ethnic groups and political parties, shaping their reputations beyond the election period.

- **Elections create incentives for both increased competition and cooperation between competing networks**

Struggles for votes between patronage networks within communities have already begun, often along ethnic or party lines. However, communities as a whole also have an incentive to cooperate and attempt to limit the number of candidates from that area to not lose the opportunity to gain political representation (there is a danger that a “split vote” can remove or dilute a community’s representation). These incentives to cooperate have the potential to unite communities. Not all communities, however, will be able to realise this potential with the elections publicly revealing hidden fault lines. Communities that are best at balancing the interests of local networks with the need to cooperate will gain the most representation in the Wolesi Jirga.

- **Much of the local debate revolves around communities attempting to limit the number of candidates from one area**

There is a widespread understanding among interviewees that due to the single non-transferable voting system in Afghanistan there is an ideal number of candidates for a certain community that will allow increased representation from that area. This means communities are already discussing ways of limiting the number of the candidates from that area. In previous elections, certain communities were particularly effective at compromising. As one voter in Balkh said, “We were able to decrease the number of candidates to three since there are three qawms living in the area—Hazara, Pashtun and Tajik. But only two of the candidates won since the Hazara qawm is small in this area.”

---

12 Dupree, “Afghanistan Continues its Experiment in Democracy,” 8.

- **Securing seats in parliament is more important than the manner in which this is done**

Communities have the motivation to elect as many representatives as possible to the *Wolesi Jirga*, regardless of how they were elected. In one study district, for example, two people from the community won seats on the provincial council in 2009. It is widely believed that one candidate won legitimately, while the other, who had little popular support, used corrupt means. Some interviewees acknowledged that there was corruption locally, which was disagreeable, but were still pleased with the outcome and the fact that their district now had two representatives on the provincial council. This pragmatism has created serious ambivalence from respondents about reports of corruption and fraud at local polling stations. It further explains why most interviewees were eager to downplay reports of fraud—not only to researchers, but also to election officials.

## 5. What this Means for the 2010 Election

With this knowledge in mind, it now becomes easier to assess the importance of the political process created by the parliamentary election scheduled for September. Notably, most voters interviewed have very different reasons for supporting the election than those generally offered by concerned international organisations, which suggests some ways that the Afghan government and international community can concentrate their efforts to strengthen democratic processes in Afghanistan.

- **The Afghan government and international community should increase their focus on parliamentary elections because they will alter or reinforce local political structures**

The primary reason for most respondents to already be discussing the upcoming election is because it creates a political forum in which a variety of patronage networks and political figures in an area can compete for the valuable prize of getting better access to the government and international community in Kabul. The international community has increasingly focused on local governance in the past years, and these elections are one of the few opportunities for Afghan voters to discuss and judge those political figures who are most influential in local politics and are key to creating stability on a local level. Respondents were generally critical of the shortcomings of current MPs in linking local communities to Kabul, but many had opinions on how MPs could better assist local communities, and a transparent election process could promote better local governance.

- **The international community and Afghan government should support programs encouraging public political debate**

Just because many votes follow loyalties to certain political networks and groups does not mean that there is not a great deal of interest in debating the merits of candidates. Moreover, most respondents suggested that voter education was not as important an issue as the lack of constructive spaces to carry on political debate. Several respondents complained that many of the debates over the selection of candidates are happening in private conversations between key party officials, elders and other influential figures. There is a significant opportunity for civil society groups and programs that encourage the strengthening of representational democracy in Afghanistan to support forums for peaceful and public dialogue.

- **Fraud and corruption are likely to increase and will be increasingly difficult to monitor, and monitoring should focus on the local level**

Improving on the 2009 elections by increasing transparency and reducing fraud and corruption would require the Afghan government, the IEC and the international community to make a commitment to reforming the electoral process; this is something most voters believe is unlikely to happen, meaning most have resigned themselves to the likelihood of another election with serious corruption and fraud. The fact that candidates also believe such corruption is likely only increases their incentive to prepare for and participate in such fraud themselves. The combination of local networks and local concerns suggests that instances of fraud will increase from the presidential and provincial council elections. This will make monitoring even more challenging and means there needs to be an increased focus on local-level monitoring at polling stations.

- **While reforms are necessary, corruption and fraud are not likely to further delegitimise the electoral process**

While most respondents suggested that fraud and corruption will increase in the coming election, few respondents expected the 2010 election to be transparent anyway. A few voters mildly chastised local provincial council candidates accused of fraud for acting dishonourably, but the majority were more concerned with securing more positions on the council for their community. In fact, in a patronage-based political system, influence comes from the perceived ability to mobilise political resources, whether or not it is done legally. As a result, the ability to influence IEC members and increase vote totals, legally or illegally, is viewed as demonstrating the power of a candidate. While efforts should be made to reform the current system, there also needs to be an understanding that this is a long-term process, and the more invested voters become in transparent local debates, the more likely they are to report and act against local instances of fraud.

- **Failure to follow constitutional procedures has had a limited impact on opinion**

Respondents were even less concerned with the following of strict constitutional procedures than they were with transparency and potential fraud. Since elections are still not yet part of a predictable democratic system in Afghanistan, most respondents were indifferent to any potential further delays of the election (so long as these delays are not perceived as indefinite). Given the international community's concern about the lack of transparency and fraud in the 2009, this implies there is more benefit for the long-term future of representational governance in Afghanistan if all parties make a serious commitment to reforming the system and the election is then delayed. Without such a commitment, however, there is little to be gained by postponing elections.

- **The work of the international community in supporting this election needs to be as transparent as possible**

The perceived role of the international community in the upcoming election will continue to shape local opinions about the international presence in Afghanistan. Many respondents are already sceptical of the role of the international community in the 2009 elections<sup>13</sup> and are suspicious of attempts to manipulate the national government. Even if international involvement is minimal, interviews suggest that the international community will still receive much of the blame for corruption and other irregularities, further damaging its reputation in the country. Moreover, attempts to reform the electoral process through behind-the-scenes negotiations with President Karzai have been used as evidence that the international community's involvement in elections are an attempt to

---

13 See Coburn, "Losing Legitimacy?"

manipulate the national government. International actors should particularly focus on programs that encourage local democratic forums and oversight.

## 6. Conclusion

The upcoming *Wolesi Jirga* election promises to be a very public test of many local political figures and networks, as well as international attempts to support democratic processes in Afghanistan. This creates numerous dangers, such as the resurrecting of old feuds between political networks, the potential for violence (as seen in the assassinations of several provincial council candidates last year) and the potential for objectionable figures to gain political strength through corrupt means during the electoral process.

However, the 2010 parliamentary election also has the potential to create a rare public space for Afghans to debate and ultimately pass judgment on the political networks that continue to shape their political lives—and with which many are very dissatisfied. The importance of this potential should not be overlooked because the election will shape local politics in Afghanistan in years to come. If capitalised upon, it will provide an opportunity for Afghans to renegotiate their relationships with powerholders in a way that that ultimately benefits themselves and encourages a more democratic future.

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is an independent research institute based in Kabul. AREU's mission is to inform and influence policy and practice through conducting high-quality, policy-relevant research and actively disseminating the results, and to promote a culture of research and learning. To achieve its mission AREU engages with policymakers, civil society, researchers and students to promote their use of AREU's research and its library, to strengthen their research capacity, and to create opportunities for analysis, reflection and debate.

AREU was established in 2002 by the assistance community working in Afghanistan and has a board of directors with representation from donors, the United Nations and other multilateral agencies, and non-governmental organisations. AREU currently receives core funds from the governments of Finland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Specific projects have been funded by the Foundation of the Open Society Institute Afghanistan (FOSIA), the Asia Foundation (TAF), the European Commission (EC), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the World Bank.

Flower Street (Corner of Street 2), Shahr-i-Naw, Kabul  
Tel: +93 (0)799 608 548 / [www.areu.org.af](http://www.areu.org.af) / [areu@areu.org.af](mailto:areu@areu.org.af)