



Lasting Peace Requires Accountable Political Institutions

An AREU statement on the importance of elections following the London Conference on Afghanistan

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Kabul, 16 February 2010.

By far the most publicised message coming from the London Conference on Afghanistan on 28 January was the promotion of reconciliation with and the reintegration of “moderate” Taliban through economic inducements. But this focus on quick solutions based on short-term financial incentives deflects attention from building viable political and administrative structures that will provide the basis for an enduring settlement. Elections and longer-term institution building are fundamental in this regard.

Presidential elections in 2009 were a disappointment to the international community and many Afghans, with evidence of widespread fraud tarnishing expectations and raising questions about the viability of Afghanistan's democratic system. As a result, donors have been slow to promise support for the planned parliamentary elections in 2010. However, elections are still largely considered by many Afghans as an appropriate and legitimate means of transferring power.¹ If international and government policy in Afghanistan is to be grounded in Afghan realities,² then elections should still be promoted and sustained as part of a larger commitment to political institution-building in Afghanistan.

The communiqué from the London Conference briefly recognises the value of supporting elections.³ But without clarifying commitments and next steps, this acknowledgement has little meaning. To substantiate Conference statements, the Afghan government and international donors now urgently need to take action in two crucial areas: confirming and supporting elections in 2010, while also focussing on long-term institution building.

Recommendations:

- **The donor community should fund parliamentary elections in 2010:** Parliamentary elections must take place. While far from perfect, the electoral cycle in Afghanistan is providing a sense of stability in the political system—a stability that in previous political regimes has not lasted more than a decade. If this era of democratic governance is to last, it is vital that a framework of elections is maintained, providing a backbone against which democratisation can take place. In the medium term, the current electoral calendar will need revisions due to the number of elections required by the Constitution, and the inability of the Afghan government to fund

¹ This is according to ongoing AREU research on democratisation and elections. For more information, see: Anna Larson, *Toward an Afghan Democracy? Exploring Perceptions of Democratisation in Afghanistan* (Kabul: AREU, 2009); and Noah Coburn, *Losing Legitimacy? Some Afghan Views on the Government, the International Community, and the 2009 Elections* (Kabul: AREU, 2009).

² AREU's statement for the London conference addressed this issue and was entitled *Grounding International Engagement in Afghan Realities*. It is available for download at www.areu.org.af

³ The communiqué is available at <http://afghanistan.hmg.gov.uk/en/conference/communique>

them autonomously. At present, it provides essential and widely-accepted benchmarks which must be maintained.

- **Acceptance of the political process must be a condition of negotiations:** The Afghan Government and donor community have stated that the accommodation of insurgent groups will only take place with their acceptance of the current Constitution. If this statement is sincere, then all parties must accept the legitimacy of elections and other political institutions currently functioning in Afghanistan as the *only means through which power can be shared*. Respect for the political process is critical to ensuring that any negotiations that do take place are considered legitimate by Afghans.
- **The donor community must support the building of political institutions between elections:** While a fixed electoral timetable is absolutely necessary, elections do not comprise democratisation. A long-term commitment to the building of political and administrative institutions *in between* elections is vital. Had there been more financial and technical assistance to the IEC between the 2005 and 2009 elections, the 2009 polls might have come closer to meeting international transparency standards. Elections will continue to be subject to fraud and public dispute if more is not done to increase the capacity and public credibility of national political and administrative institutions.
- **The Independent Election Commission (IEC) must take the lead in restoring its own credibility:** Even with donor support, the credibility of the IEC will not be restored unless it takes substantive measures to improve its own accountability to the Afghan people. These measures should comprise more than the token expunging of contract workers: incidences of fraud taking place at the hands of permanent IEC staff at the centre must also be addressed immediately, along with issues of how its leadership is selected. More generally, stronger mechanisms are needed to hold administrative and political institutions at all levels accountable for their actions and decisions, so that Afghans can have faith in government structures. Without insisting on transparent processes, the Afghan government is only undermining its own perceived legitimacy as support for the opposition increases.
- **The Afghan government must revise the Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) system:** SNTV is not conducive to forming an organised or efficient parliament. A party list of reserved seats for party candidates should be added to those seats gained through SNTV as an interim measure to encourage the development of political parties. This cannot happen before the 2010 elections, but it must be a goal for 2015 and work must begin now, as widespread civic education will be necessary beforehand to raise public awareness of the changes to the system. Furthermore, if these changes are to make genuine and lasting improvements to the effectiveness of parliament, they need substantive top-level buy-in. If the President formed his own party, it would be in his interest to encourage the strengthening of the legislature.

The London Conference made some important acknowledgements about the short-term needs and concerns of Afghans, but paid far too little attention to longer-term strategies. AREU believes that it is in the gradual development of political institutions, and not through quick-fix approaches like buying allegiance, that the future of a stable Afghanistan lies. This is the time for the international community to recognise that it is through long-term and principled engagement that it can contribute most constructively to Afghanistan's future.