Swinging Between Hope and Despair:

Kabul Citizens' Voting Behaviour in the 2018

Wolesi Jirga Election

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AREU Research for a Better Afghanistan

Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

Briefing Paper

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About the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is an independent research institute based in Kabul that was established in 2002 by the assistance of the international community in Afghanistan. AREU's mission is to inform and influence policy and practice by conducting high-quality, policy-relevant, evidence-based research and actively disseminating the results and promote a culture of research and learning. As the top think-tank in Afghanistan and number five in Central Asia according to the Global Go To Think Tank Index Report at the University of Pennsylvania, AREU achieves its mission by engaging with policy makers, civil society, researchers and academics to promote their use of AREU's research-based publications and its library, strengthening their research capacity and creating opportunities for analysis, reflection and debate. AREU is governed by a Board of Directors comprised of representatives of donor organisations, embassies, the United Nations and other multilateral agencies, Afghan civil society and independent experts.

AREU's core donor is the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). Specific projects in 2018 are being funded by the European Union (EU), Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), United States Institute of Peace (USIP), Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Overseas Development Institute (ODI-UK), Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), and British Council (BC).

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In 2018, AREU was awarded Best International Social Think Tank by Prospect Magazine.

1. Introduction

On 31 March, the Afghanistan Independent Elections Commission (IEC) announced that the election for the *Wolesi Jirga* (Lower House of the Parliament) will be held on 20 October 2018. The IEC designated 14 April as the opening date of 1,500 voter registration centres across the country. The government of Afghanistan started a widespread campaign encouraging registration for the upcoming *Wolesi Jirga* election. As a result, despite security issues and terrorist attacks on voter registration centres, approximately 9 million citizens registered. It is important to note that statistics from previous elections show a significant decrease in the number of voters between 2005 and 2010 elections. In the 2005 *Wolesi Jirga* elections, 12.8 million voter cards were issued and only 6.4 million ballots were cast. Similarly, in the 2010 *Wolesi Jirga* elections, 9.2 million voter cards were issued and only 4.21 million ballots were cast (National Democratic Insitutite, 2010). This shows that around 50 percent of those who registered actually voted in the elections.

This Briefing Paper presents a summary of the initial findings from AREU's research on the parliamentary elections. The study aims to analyse the voting behaviour of Kabul citizens in the upcoming 2018 *Wolesi Jirga* elections. Taking into consideration the deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan (The World Bank , 2018), as well as the long delay in holding elections, this study will mainly focus on the factors that are going to influence the voting behaviour of Kabul residents in the 2018 parliamentary elections. The paper will first describe the methodology, followed by the initial key findings from the research and conclude with a number of recommendations.

2.   Methodology

This study is based on the qualitative method using semi-structured interviews, structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) and observation notes. It is a collective case study conducted in four areas of Kabul City, namely Dasht-e Barchi, Khair Khana, Kart-e Naw and Shahr-e Naw. These areas mostly represent the city's four main ethnic groups: Hazaras, Tajiks, Pashtuns and Uzbeks. The participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their ethnicity, political party affiliation and gender. This sampling method helped us to obtain different viewpoints in varying contexts. A total of 69 interviews, including 44 individual in-depth interviews and 3 FGDs consisting of six to 10 people, with private citizens, candidates, political parties, IEC, national and international election observation institutions, were conducted. The interviews were conducted by the authors and the duration of each individual interview was between 45 to 90 minutes. Furthermore, the authors attended and observed press conferences at the IEC. Preliminary findings of the study were validated through an open dialogue held at AREU on 10 October 2018.

3.   Key Findings

3.1   Voters' Registration

The precise number of registered voters and the existence of a significant number of fake registration cards has been a longstanding issue that has been raised by the media, some candidates and the political opposition of the government. Following the controversies and the allegations of widespread electoral fraud in the 2014 presidential and provincial council elections, the IEC decided to use stickered Tazkira instead of registration cards. The IEC spokesperson stated that a total of 9,072,208 citizens (64 percent male and 34 percent female[1]), have registered to vote in the 2018 parliamentary election (Sadat, 2018). However, election monitoring organisations doubt the accuracy of these figures due to the sudden increase in registration in the last few days of the registration period. According to the Free and Fair Election Forum of Afghanistan (FEFA), the voters' database was not accessible for monitoring organisations. Therefore, they are suspicious of IEC's statistics (FEFA, 2018). It is important to note that the IEC recently removed more than 500,000 voters from the final list following a vetting process.

3.1.1   Reasons for Registration

Among the 49 private citizens that we interviewed who are eligible for voting, 33 have registered. 27 of these 33 have registered with the intention of voting. Six have registered for other reasons and mentioned that they were under pressure to register themselves. Some of them explained that if they were not registered, they would face problems in government offices. Others, who are government employees, stated that they were concerned they would lose their jobs if they did not register.

There were at least three motives for participants who registered with the intention to vote: 1) voting to strengthen democracy, 2) voting to elect a representative who they can relate to because of a shared social condition (gender, ethnicity, generation, profession, political leaning), and 3) voting to bring reform to the parliament. It appears that those who want to either strengthen democracy or to bring reform to the parliament are more hopeful about the impact of their vote on final results of the election. However, they are also deeply worried about electoral fraud.

3.1.2   Reasons for Not Registering or Voting

Insecurity: From the four areas included in the study, the residents of Dasht-e Barchi were most concerned about the security of registration centres. On 22 April, a registration centre in this area was attacked by ISIS and resulted in the deaths of more than 30 individuals. Participants are worried about the security in all phases of the election process, not just the registration phase. Another security concern is regarding the stickers attached to *Tazkiras*. This is a major concern for voters who want to travel to the provinces. Most of the highways from Kabul to other provinces include checkpoints set up by the Taliban and other insurgent groups, where the *Tazkiras* of passengers are checked. Fear of angering insurgent groups has forced some people to avoid registration so that they can safely travel to other provinces. As a result of this issue, the IEC reached an agreement with the Afghanistan Central Civil Registration Authority for the issuance of a duplicate *Tazkira* for voters so that they could travel without security concerns. However, the IEC did not inform their own registration teams or citizens regarding this agreement and therefore, it had no impact on registration.

Female-Specific Concerns: The highest percentage of women who voted in an election was during the 2004 presidency election, where 41 percent of the voters were female. In the 2018 *Wolesi Jirga* Election, 34 percent of registered voters are female but observing organisations believe that the participation of women, either as candidates or voters, has decreased and question the authenticity of official statistics (FEFA, 2018). Female participants state that their participation depends on their family's permission, particularly the male members. Not only is this a concern among ordinary women

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1   . The IEC reports the remaining 2% as Kuchi and Hindu/Sikh registered voters.

but also among female candidate and women in high positions in the Afghan government. Female members of parliament (MPs) often feel they are underestimated and that their voices are not heard.

Lack of Confidence in Election Process Transparency: Due to allegations of fraud in previous elections, most of the study participants are cynical about transparency in the upcoming election. However, there are some participants who want to vote, despite believing that there will be prevalent fraud during the election process. They believe that their participation will have an impact on decreasing fraudulent practices.

Dissatisfaction with the Performance of the Wolesi Jirga**/MPs:** There is widespread dissatisfaction with the performance of the *Wolesi Jirga* and MPs, which has discouraged citizens from registering to vote in the upcoming election. On the other hand, it has also encouraged certain people to register to vote because they want to bring reform to the *Wolesi Jirga*.

3.1.3 Fraud in the Voters' Registration Process

Different types of fraud were reported by the observing organisations (FEFA, 2018) and the study participants during the registration process in Kabul city. These included selling of registered Tazkiras, possession of fake and/or multiple Tazkiras, proxy registration and forced seizure of Tazkiras for a specific candidate.

3.2 Criteria for an Ideal Candidate: A Constituent-Oriented Candidate

3.2.1 Group Interests

At least three different social groups are influencing voting behaviour: ethnic groups, profession groups and political parties.

Ethnic Group

The most influential factor in determining voting behaviour is ethnic groups, which function as the primary filter for most of the participants. When there is more than one candidate from the same community within an ethnic group, other characteristics of the candidates, such as education, religiosity, legal acumen and whether or not they are a *Jihadi*, come into play. While one group of voters states that the presence of their ethnic candidate in the *Wolesi Jirga* is sufficient, another group states that a candidate's ethnic identity is not enough to vote for them. Rather, they expect the candidate to be from their own community. Here, community refers to a group on a district or tribal level. Community-oriented voting is popular among Pashtun, Tajik and Hazara participants in this study because they consider a candidate from their community to be accessible, accountable and familiar with the problems of the community. However, Uzbek participants have not shown a preference for community-oriented voting because the Uzbek population in Kabul is much smaller than that of other ethnic groups.

Dissatisfaction with representation in the government and the feeling of discrimination is widespread among all participants from the four ethnic groups. Most believe that their political presence and influence are not representative, but they cite different reasons for this issue.

Uzbek: General Abdul Rashid Dostum remains the dominant leader among the Uzbeks and his absence in the government has caused the Uzbeks to feel ignored and discriminated against by the government and specifically the President. Still, the Uzbeks do not blame their leader for the situation and argue that they have been deceived by the President. Therefore, more candidates are keen to be nominated by Dostum's party, *Junbish-e Milli Islami*. According to Junbish, 45 candidates in the upcoming *Wolesi Jirga* election are backed by the party.

Hazara: Hazaras consider their presence in the government as symbolic and inadequate. They blame their leaders and the government for the situation. Therefore, movements such as *Junbish-e Tabassom* (Tabassom's Movement) and *Junbish-e Roshanayi* (the Enlightening Movement) could mobilize thousands of Hazaras to protest against this discrimination. Similarly, candidates from the Hazara ethnic group use slogans to highlight and fight against discrimination in the government.

Tajik: Tajiks have similar views on the symbolic presence of their leaders and being ignored by the government. However, they criticize their leaders for accepting the National Unity Government (NUG) agreement, which gave Ashraf Ghani the Presidency and Abdullah Abdullah the Chief Executive post. They claim Abdullah had won enough votes to be the President, but this agreement gave Ghani the upper hand and he has worked to exclude Tajiks from positions of power.

Pashtun: Pashtun participants are also dissatisfied with the situation and argue that their presence in the government has decreased in the post-2001 power distribution. They blame the international community and the leaders of other ethnic groups for the situation.

Political Party Affiliation

Generally, there is widespread pessimism towards political parties among participants with no party affiliation. There are four participants, who have party membership. Among them, only *Junbish-e Milli* Party members were satisfied with the performance of their parties and remained active.

Profession Groups

Another social factor, which influences voter behaviour is profession groups. In some cases, people are more likely to vote for a candidate who has a similar professional background as them. Being in the same profession group makes the voter's and candidate's interests closer to one another. Here the voting preference seems to be more rational and profit-based rather than related to social identity.

3.2.2   Personal Networks and Connections

Personally knowing a candidate has a strong impact on the voter's choice. Again, an important reason for this choice can be having access to the candidate after they have become an MP. It is interesting to mention that this factor is sometimes more influential than ethnic identity of the candidates.

3.2.3   Personal Interests

Some voters consider their personal interests more important than the group's interests. This group of voters evaluate the promises of the candidates by this criterion. Some candidates' promises include these interests, employment, solving the constituency's problems in governmental offices and even educational scholarships for students.

3.3   MP/Wolesi Jirga and Citizens Relations: Hollow Promises and Unrealistic Expectations

In the previous *Wolesi Jir*ga election campaigns, the candidates made a wide range of promises to their constituency. Often these promises included matters that require the powers of the executive branch rather than the legislative, such as urban construction, maintaining security and providing healthcare, educational facilities, scholarship and employment. In most of the cases, the candidates made promises that they could not fulfil. Similar trends have been witnessed in the upcoming *Wolesi Jirga* election campaigns.

Not only have they made hollow promises, they have also failed to fulfil their responsibilities. The MPs have been absent when parliament has been in session; they have not been accessible to their constituency and their oversight of the work of the government has been for their own business and personal interests. Another issue that was raised during the study was "selective representation", which pertains to the viewpoints of both the constituents and the MPs. Even if the MP is from their province, which is considered one electoral constituency, some constituents do not consider themselves to be represented by the MP. This is due to factors such as ethnic background, gender and personal relations. On the other hand, MPs also do not feel inclined to represent the interests of constituents that they do not share a common interest or background with.

3.3.1   Dysfunction of the Wolesi Jirga and MPs

Andrew Wilder predicted in the first parliamentary election in 2005 that the legitimacy of the MPs would be determined through performance in office rather than how they were elected (Wilder, 2005, p. 38). According to the study participants, in addition to not fulfilling their responsibilities, MPs are also violating laws and working against the interests of their constituency. Therefore, they have lost their legitimacy in the eyes of their constituents.

3.3.2   A Good Minority: Few MPs Have Fulfilled Their Responsibilities

Despite an overall negative assessment of the *Wolesi Jirga* and the MPs, some of the participants were satisfied with the performance of a number of MPs. These MPs have expressed peoples' concerns in their speeches in the *Wolesi Jirga* and in the media; some have legal acumen; others have constructed roads, schools and clinics; some have helped with solving local disputes. However, the study participants believe that these MPs will have no significant impact given that the *Wolesi Jirga* is affected by rampant corruption.

3.3.3   Local Problems and Unrealistic Expectations

When asked about the main problems in the area that should be handled by the MPs, urban problems, insecurity, lack of education, healthcare facilities and unemployment were mentioned by the study participants. The unrealistic expectations of the people we interviewed are due to two reasons. Firstly, the citizens, including university students and school teachers, are unaware of the law and responsibilities of the MPs. Secondly, the candidates have made hollow promises to them. However, some participants do believe that the MPs have indirect responsibility in solving these problems through informing related government institutions and by ratifying relevant laws.

3.4   Fragile Political Parties and Pessimistic Afghans

In Afghanistan, there are 72 registered political parties, almost all centred in Kabul (Ministry of Justice, 2018). However, the respondents were aware of only a few of them when they were asked, even then their awareness was informed by their location. Only four (out of 16) in Khair Khana are aware of the active political parties and have mentioned Jamiat-e Islami, Rawand-e Sabz, Hezb-e Islami and Junbish Milli Islami. Eight (out of 11) respondents in Dashte Barchi have named Hezb-e Harakat Islami, Hezb-e Wahdat Islami (Khalili), Hezb-e Wahdat Islami Mardom (Mohaqeq) and Hezb-e Millat as active political parties in their area. Only three (out of 16) respondents in Kart-e Naw have information about active political parties in their area, which are Hezb-e Islami, Mahaz-e Milli, Da Soli Ghorzang Gond, Afghan Millat and Jamiat-e Islami. All six of the respondents in Shahr-e Naw know about Junbish Milli Islami. Nonetheless, a majority of the respondents for this study were not party members, with the exception of four individuals.

3.4.1   Individuals vs Parties: Undesirable Competition for Parties

The current Electoral Law does not consider a special quota for political parties.[2] All four party representatives interviewed mentioned the issue and argue that the current electoral system does not offer a friendly situation for political parties to compete in the elections. Rather, it favours independent candidates. Therefore, well-known political party members have nominated themselves in the election as independent candidates. Party candidates make up only 5.3 percent (43 out of 803) of the candidates in Kabul and 7.5 percent (192 out of 2,565) of the candidates across the country (Independent Election Commission, 2018). Similarly, voters are not likely to favour candidates that align themselves with a party.

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2.   The current electoral system of Afghanistan is based on the Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) system under which, each voter casts one vote for a candidate and there is more than one seat to be filled in each electoral district. Those candidates with the highest vote totals fill these positions.

3.4.2   Pessimism Among Citizens

There is general cynicism regarding political parties among participants. While three (out of six) participants in Shahr-e Naw are optimistic about political parties, participants from the other three areas are pessimistic about political parties. In some cases, people cannot distinguish between political parties and *Jihadi* groups. The reasons mentioned for their negative view of political parties include: they are tools for the benefits of their leaders; they are dependent on foreign aid; they cause disharmony in society; they are limited to specific ethnic groups; and they do not have a clear agenda.

3.5   IEC Performance

Almost no participants were satisfied with voter awareness campaigns launched by IEC. FEFA believes that inadequate voter awareness is one of the reasons for a decrease in participation rates (FEFA, 2018). Furthermore, accusations of fraud in the elections have delegitimised the election process and institutions in the eyes of citizens. Almost all of the participants mentioned the 2014 disputed presidential election as well as other elections as the reason for their belief that IEC members are actively involved in electoral fraud. The incapability of the IEC is a bigger concern. As one of the former IEC commissioners argues, the current Commission is weaker than the former ones as the Commission's reputation has been damaged since the last contested elections. Also, other organisations such as the Ministry of Interior (MoI), National Army and Central Statistics Organisation (CSO) do not cooperate with the Commission, which further hinders their capability. The IEC will face bigger challenges once the results of the election are announced because they will be largely contested (Former IEC Commissioner, 2018).

3.5.1   Independence of the IEC

The IEC commissioners are appointed by the President and they are expected to follow his orders. When talking about the independence of the IEC and foreign interference, all participants recall the 2014 disputed presidential election and affirm that foreigners do interfere in the election. However, there are two different views on the role of foreigners. On the one hand, some of the participants consider foreign interference in the election as constructive without which Afghans cannot have an election. On the other hand, other participants argue that foreigners interfere in the election to pursue their own interests. According to these participants, foreigners provide financial support for specific candidates and also interfere in the IEC to get them elected.

3.5.2　Use of Biometric Machines and Related Issues

The IEC initially announced that the upcoming *Wolesi Jirga* election will employ the use of biometric machines for voting purposes in order to ensure a transparent election and to restore trust in the election process. However, later on, the IEC stated that due to financial issues, biometric machines will not be used in the upcoming election. In a recent gathering, prominent political parties announced their boycott of the election unless the IEC reinstates the use of biometric machines on election day (BBC Persian, 2018). Meanwhile, in an interview with the authors on 5 September, the IEC Spokesperson stated that it is impossible to use biometric machines in the *Wolesi Jirga* election (Sadat, 2018). Additionally, FEFA questioned the use of biometric machines in the *Wolesi Jirga* election due to: 1) the lack of a legal framework, which would ensure proper legal conduct by the machine vendor; 2) the lengthy procurement procedure for purchasing these machines; 3) the time-consuming procedure needed to check all 24,000 machines, which would not be possible before the election; and 4) the lack of capacity at IEC to hire and train enough employees for the use of these machines before the election (FEFA, 2018). Although the IEC has announced that the 24,000 biometric machines are purchased and will be sent to all the polling stations before the election, the use of these machines on election day is doubtful. It is also important to note that the awareness campaign started by the IEC rarely mentions the use of these machines during the election.

3.6　Election Information Sources

While the participants have assessed the awareness campaign of the IEC as insufficient, they mention television and informal sources, such as family and friends and social media (mostly Facebook) as the main sources of information about the election. Community associations have also been mentioned as a source of information. These associations have been active in introducing candidates and supporting them through formal and informal channels. In this regard, associations have been more active than political parties in the upcoming Wolesi Jirga elections. However, the MoJ has warned the associations not to have political activities (BBC Persian, 2018).

The data of this study was collected before the start of the election campaigns. Therefore, the participants have not mentioned the campaign as a source of information.

4.   Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite the challenges and issues elaborated in this briefing paper, the elections are about to be held in a few days. Through this paper, the authors have discussed the factors that influence voting behaviour, citizens' assessment of the *Wolesi Jirga*, the role of political parties in the election, performance of the IEC, and sources of information about the election. The authors acknowledge that this analysis and assessment does not represent the whole spectrum of voters and candidates as the study focuses on Kabul city. The following are some recommendations for ensuring a transparent election and restoring trust in democratic institutions:

- IEC, IECC, and monitoring organisations should work on a comprehensive communications strategy that enables them to educate the citizens on every phase of the elections process to gain people's trust, ensure everyone follows the process duly, and avoid misconducts by any group, such as candidates, observers and voters.

- To maintain election security, MoI, the National Army and NATO forces need to work closely with IEC on coordinating security plans for each voting site and election-related activities. A hotline number for reporting of security issues related to the election needs to be established for rapid response in case of need for support on election day.

- The IEC does not have the sole responsibility of observing the elections. The role of political parties, citizens, candidates and independent election observation organisations in observing all future elections needs to be implemented as well. A clear code of conduct must be prepared and shared with all observers clarifying the Dos and Don'ts on election day.

- In order to ensure IEC commissioners' independence, a more innovative selection approach should be determined. One suggestion would be to appoint IEC commissioners from among the experienced IEC through the Civil Service Commission. Furthermore, practical mechanisms of ensuring independence and transparency of the election commission should be mapped out in order to ensure the members are not under the influence of one group in or outside the government.

- Currently, the international community is the primary source of funding for the IEC. However, there is no specific budget for the IEC, which often leads to delays and hinders the commissions. In order to avoid these issues in the future, a specific budget should be allocated to the IEC.

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Date	Publication Name	Author	Available in Dari	Available in Pashto	Research Theme	Publication Type
September 2018	Policy Research Institutions and Health Sustainable Development Goals: Building Momentum in South Asia	Said Ahmad Maisam Najafizada			Social Protection	Country Report
September 2018	Gender-Based Violence Among IDP Children in Kabul: Measures to Take	Leah Wilfreda RE Pilongo, Chona R. Echavez			Social Protection	Policy Note
August 2018	Politics over evidence: questioning the link between service deliver and state legitimacy in Afghanistan.	Ashley Jackson and Dr. Orzala Nemat			Social Protection	Briefing Paper
July 2018	Radical and Active: Radicalisation among University Students in Kabul and Herat	Dr. Weeda Mehran			Social Protection	Policy Note
May 2018	Still Water Runs Deep: Illicit Poppy and the Transformation of the Deserts of Southwest Afghanistan	Dr. David Mansfield	√	√	Natural Resources Management	Issue Paper
May 2018	Assessing EUPOL Impact on Afghan Police Reform (2007-2016)	Qayoom Suroush			Social Protection	Working Paper
April 2018	No more standard programming: economic development in fragile settings				Social Protection	Briefing Paper

March 2018	A Mapping Study: Institutional Mechanisms to tackle Trafficking in Persons in Afghanistan	Superva Narasimhaiah			Social Protection	Issue Paper
March 2018	A Mapping Study: Institutional Mechanisms to Tackle Trafficking in Persons in Afghanistan	Wali Mohammad Kandiwal	∫	∫	Social Protection	Policy Note
January 2018	Urban Safety: A Review of the Afghanistan Urban Peacebuilding Program	Yama Turabi	∫	∫	Social Protection	Policy Note
January 2018	Typologies of nomad-settler conflict in Afghanistan	Antonio Giustozzi	∫	∫	Natural Resource Management	Issue Paper
November 2017	Disease or Symptom? Afghanistan's Burgeoning Opium Economy in 2017	William A. Byrd			Natural Resource Management	Policy Note
December 2017	The Assessment of EU Crisis Response in Afghanistan	Chona R. Echavez, Qayoom Suroush			Social Protection	Policy Note
October 2017	Truly Unprecedented: How the Helmand Food Zone supported an increase in the province's capacity to produce opium	David Mansfield	∫	∫	Natural Resource Management	Issues Paper
August 2017	Judicial Review in Afghanistan	Ghizaal Haress	∫	∫	Constitutional Law	Issues Paper
August 2017	Executive Review in Afghanistan	Kawun Kakar	∫	∫	Constitutional Law	Issues Paper
July 2017	Women in Agriculture in Afghanistan	Lena Ganesh			Gender	Issues Paper
July 2017	The Impacts of Water Sector Reform	Atal Ahmadzai			Governance	Issues Paper
July 2017	Urban Governance in Afghanistan	Detlef Kammeier			Governance	Issues Paper