DISAPPEARING INK

Afghanistan's sham democracy

By Matthieu Aikins

There are many ways to cheat in an Afghan election. If you'd like to vote more than once, you can use bleach to scrub off the indelible ink they mark your finger with at the polling station. You'll need another voter-registration card for them to clip, but those are available for $5 in the bazaar. (With 17.4 million cards issued to an estimated 12.5 million eligible voters, there are plenty of extras floating around.) There's no centralized system to prevent you from getting multiple cards from different registration centers; nor are there voter rolls that would list you at any particular polling station. Fake cards are also printed by the thousands in Pakistan; your favorite candidate may have placed a bulk order and provided you with several cards.

Election workers carry ballot boxes at the Independent Election Commission's Herat headquarters, September 19, 2010 © STRDEL/AFP/Getty Images

Then there's fraud that the poll workers themselves can commit either by ballot-stuffing or by falsifying the count in their reports to the Independent Election Commission (IEC) in Kabul. These methods work best in insecure areas—most of the country—where it's easier to pay off or intimidate election staff and the other candidates' observers. It helps if you're a warlord, or if you've made millions from development and military contracts—or both.

Finally, there is the computerized tally center in Kabul, where, at a keystroke, zeros can be added or taken off any total. In 2009, after the disastrous presidential election, two officials in the IT department of the IEC set fire to their computers and fled to Canada, where they claimed refugee status, presumably to cover up their part in manipulating the results. (They left the country on visas for an international conference on elections.)

On September 18, 2010, during the election of the Wolesi Jirga, the lower house of the National Assembly, these mechanisms of fraud were on open display. Members of the Afghan parliament are elected to five-year terms, so this was the country's first chance to replace the 249 MPs elected in 2005. It was also meant to be an opportunity to fix the mistakes of 2009's presidential election, when Hamid Karzai bludgeoned his way to a second term. I went to the village of Balabagh, a three-hour drive east of Kabul in the mountains of Nangarhar province, to see what was taking place in the country's less secure areas. In Sherzad, the next district to the west, the Taliban controlled everything except the voting center, which had to have its polling materials brought in by helicopter (the center came under attack on election day and never opened). In Balabagh, the polling center took rockets and

Matthieu Aikins is a freelance writer based in New York. His article "The Master of Spin Boldak" appeared in the December 2009 issue of Harper's Magazine.

machine-gun fire from the hills throughout the day, though no one was hurt. Turnout was low. On the road there, I stopped to ask three loitering young men where the polling center was. They told me to go a bit farther down the road. I asked whether they had gone to the center to vote. "What are we, crazy?" They laughed. "The Taliban have been shooting at it all day."

The polling station in Balabagh was still open when I arrived, but it had been taken over by gunmen loyal to one of the candidates. I found a group of voters gathered around a pool in the courtyard, washing their fingers in the muddy water, rubbing off the ink with pumice-like bricks until their skin came up raw and pink and clean. "We're not doing it to cheat," said one old man. "We're doing it because of the Taliban." I asked if they would get their fingers cut off it they were caught. "Finger? They'll cut off the whole arm."

Other areas in the district were equally restive. At one voting center a candidate showed up with his armed bodyguards (he was angry that some of his supporters had been arrested with sheaves of fake voter cards), and a gunfight broke out. I stopped in at district headquarters to see Habib Safi, the local police commander, who assured me that he had control of the area. He and his deputy had a bottle of bleach on the table and they were rubbing the last traces of ink off their fingers. When I asked them what they were doing, they shrugged. "The elections are finished now," said Safi.

Donor countries underwrote this election to the tune of $120 million; it was overseen by experts from around the globe; but in the end it was still the product of the unworkable political system put in place after the United States toppled the Taliban in 2001. Elections have become, like so much about this country, something the West would like to hold at arm's length.

On the night before the election, Staffan de Mistura, the top U.N. official in Afghanistan, was interviewed by the BBC's Lyse Doucet. (De Mistura's statements to the media are relished within Kabul's expat community for their unintentional distillation of the absurdity of the country. "It is a chicken-and-egg situation," he said in July when a reporter asked whether Afghanistan was ready to govern itself. "But the chicken is saying, 'We are ready to produce an egg.'") Doucet asked de Mistura how, given the deteriorating security situation across the country, any sort of free and fair elections could be held.

"It's the worst possible moment, let's be frank," replied de Mistura.

"Some would say it's irresponsible to hold an election now," Doucet continued.

De Mistura grinned. "It could be, and that's why we should be admiring the Afghans for doing it."

The Anglicism "democracy," for many Afghans, has become synonymous with unprecedented corruption, moral decay, and hypocrisy; it is another one of the plagues that the West has brought to this country. In Kabul a few weeks before the election, I asked a taxi driver whether he was planning to vote. "They're all thieves," he said, and pointed to a billboard of Zalmay Tufan that was hanging above one of the city's main intersections. In the picture, Tufan wore a karakul (the wedge-shaped cap Karzai is partial to) and a droopy mustache. A former jihadi commander, Tufan has been denounced by Human Rights Watch for his participation in the Afshar Massacre of 1993, in which thousands of homes in Kabul were looted and hundreds of civilians were raped and killed. Since the fall of the Taliban, Tufan's house in Kabul has been surrounded by gunmen who keep guard amid fighting dogs and clouds of hash smoke. Tufan had worked as a police commander in the early years after the U.S. invasion and was now looking to get into politics.

Candidates with links to illegal armed groups were supposed to be, under Afghanistan's electoral law, barred from standing for office. Yet the initial list of banned candidates released by the IEC on June 22 contained just five names, none of them powerful figures. After seeing the list, de Mistura went to Karzai to ask him to pressure the vetting committee into doing a more thorough job—this despite the fact that the committee was supposedly independent. Within a week, a longer list, with thirty-six names, was duly supplied.

The new list was even more mystifying. Many of the names were minor candidates with no connections to armed groups. It was an early test of the seriousness of the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC), a mixed Afghan and international body created to certify the IEC's decisions and investigate claims of fraud. At an emergency meeting held after the release of the new list, Johann Kriegler, the elderly South African judge who had been appointed a commissioner of the ECC, seemed resigned to the fact that the vetting process would not exclude the warlords. "He admitted that there were innocent people who were disqualified and guilty people who were not," said an international elections observer who had been present but asked not to be identified by name. "He also said that the electoral system in Afghanistan as it is right now doesn't function at all."

I met up with one of the disqualified candidates, Mohammed Ibrahim, who had come to the capital from his home in the north on a futile quest for redress. Mama Ibrahim, as he is known (*mama* means "maternal uncle" in Dari), is a member of the Hazara, the predominantly Shia ethnic minority that was persecuted by the Taliban. He had served for decades as a civil servant before putting himself up for election. His shoulder covered by a green cape, he spread his documents out on my living-room table as he recounted the maze of bureaucracies he had navigated in an attempt to get his name back on the ballot. He had letters from Balkh province's defense, interior, and intelligence ministries, as well as from the police chief and the governor's office, affirming that he had no connection to armed groups. The IEC had refused to review his case, and the ECC had told him to go see the IEC.

What he found especially humiliating was that they had published his name as Mama Ibrahim Lang; *lang* can mean "lame" or "legless" and is a common nickname for jihadi commanders who, like the captains of pirate ships, tend to be missing append-

ages. "I'm not Ibrahim Lame," he complained. "I'm Ibrahim Fine." He kicked out and slapped his healthy legs for emphasis. Like many candidates on the revised list, Ibrahim seemed to have been chosen for his lack of political connections and inability to fight back.

In June I also met with Aziz Ludin, who was chairman of the IEC during the 2009 elections and had been forced to resign afterward under international pressure. He was bitter that blame for the last election had been pinned on him. "What was their reform? 'Ludin must go away!'" Other reforms—voter and civic education, strengthening the IEC and ECC, and a system of voter rolls—were proposed but never implemented. Ludin told me that before he left the IEC he had begun an investigation of Zakaria Barakzai, the deputy head of the IEC, and Ahmad Amarkhel, head of operations. He had passed the dossier on to the new IEC chairman, Fazal Ahmad Manawi. "I spoke to Manawi two weeks ago and he said it's still ongoing," Ludin told me. Manawi refused to discuss the investigation with me. A senior official in the IEC told me that Manawi had not done anything with it for fear that any allegations of impropriety might "sabotage the elections."

The same logic seemed to inspire those who composed the paltry list of banned candidates: do the minimal amount necessary to please the international observers, but by no means upset the established power structure. The international community was happy to play along: the presidential election—in which they had achieved the worst of both worlds, alienating Karzai but still failing to change the outcome—had been so traumatic that there was little will to do anything but rubber-stamp the parliamentary election. When, for example, Karzai decreed last February that the electoral law was henceforth changed and that the ECC would no longer be appointed by the internationals but by him, no one raised a serious objection.

"This is not Switzerland," de Mistura would repeat endlessly as the election approached. "Afghan good enough" became a mantra here among NATO soldiers and development officials alike.

There had once been high hopes for democracy in Afghanistan. In December of 2003, the Constitutional Loya Jirga (Grand Assembly) brought together 502 delegates from around the country to decide what form of government Afghanistan would have. But the delegates were soon divided on the question of how much power to give to the president. Karzai, who had been appointed interim president by the Emergency Loya Jirga in 2002, was pushing for a centralized state with a strong executive branch; shortly before the constitutional convention, he threatened to resign if his preferred system was not adopted. Many reformists, too, were in favor of a centralized system, as a means of imposing modernization on the country. On the other side, a bloc of Afghanistan's northern and minority ethnic groups wanted a system that would place less

A polling station in Kabul, September 18, 2010 © Patrick Baz/AFP/Getty Images

اوقات غیر مزدحم !
ما می توانیم...

power with the president, who would undoubtedly be Pashtun (the largest ethnic group).

Opinions were also split among the internationals taking part in the constitutional convention. Whereas Karzai was still a darling of the West, many in the diplomatic community were concerned about relying on him alone. "Our position was that we wanted a strong parliament so that there would be checks and balances," recalled Thomas Ruttig, who attended the Jirga as a political officer for the U.N. and is now codirector of the Kabul-based Afghanistan Analysts Network. "One with a prime-ministerial post would have given us a chance to change horses in midstream as well."

But Karzai had a key backer in Zalmay Khalilzad, the United States' powerful Afghan-American ambassador to Afghanistan between 2003 and 2005. Khalilzad, who excelled in the backroom-dealing culture of the region, had been instrumental in pushing aside the former king, Zahir Shah, during the Emergency Loya Jirga, in order to make way for Karzai.

"Zalmay—who seemed to have a kind of carte blanche from the administration—had a one-point agenda, and that was a system where Karzai was as strong as possible so that they would have one person to deal with," said Ruttig.

Khalilzad maintains that he never intervened in favor of any specific system or candidate. "Some people think that the U.S. has imposed this order on Afghanistan," Khalilzad, who today runs a D.C.-based consulting firm, told me when I spoke to him this fall. "I had no position myself. It was not up to us."

After three weeks of deliberation, and a short-lived walkout by delegates from various minority groups, Karzai and his supporters got exactly what they wanted. The president had final say on the appointment of the provincial governors, and almost all local offices were controlled directly from Kabul.

Parliament—which was meant to be the biggest check on Karzai's power, the institution that expressed the country's diversity and wrote its laws—has proved to be extraordinarily weak. In its "Report on the Accomplishments of Wolesi Jirga," the previous parliament listed as one of its achievements the "ordering and fixing of stickers of names of Wolesi Jirga members on their desks." Its most famous law was a bill that gave immunity to those accused of war crimes committed before 2001. Karzai, meanwhile, has repeatedly violated the constitution, appointing ministers and passing laws by presidential decree whenever parliament offers him any resistance.

The electoral system itself has compounded the constitutional problems faced by the Wolesi Jirga. In advance of the 2005 parliamentary election, Karzai and his allies lobbied for the institution of a system known as single non-transferable vote (SNTV)—a voting mechanism

Election posters in Kabul, September 16, 2010 © Paula Bronstein/Getty Images

Afghanistan shares only with Indonesia, Jordan, the Pitcairn Islands, Thailand, and Vanuatu. Rather than having parties win seats based on their share of the vote, as in most European countries, or having a few candidates compete for a single seat, as in the United States, under SNTV a large pool of candidates run for a number of seats assigned to a province, and voters cast a single vote for the candidate of their choice. Votes are often so spread out that elections become like a lottery. In 2005 in Kabul, some candidates had been elected with one half of one percent of the province's total votes, and countrywide 68 percent of all votes were cast for losing candidates. The system more or less precludes the creation of stable political blocs.

"When Karzai understood how the system worked, he was more attracted to it," said Michael Semple, a regional expert who, as a senior official with the European Union, had explained the pitfalls of SNTV to Karzai.

"At the end what you were going to create was a parliament of individuals who by default will end up favoring warlords," said a U.N. official who was involved with the electoral-system project and spoke on condition of anonymity. "What we failed to understand was that we were going to end up doing what Karzai wanted. The U.N. was not going to piss off the Americans, the Brits would do the same, and the Europeans were going to go with the majority." In May of 2004, at a meeting held in the residence of Jean Arnault, who was then the top U.N. official in Afghanistan, and attended by most of the senior members of the diplomatic community in Kabul, Khalilzad arrived late and declared, simply, "I've spoken with the president, and it's going to be SNTV."

"It was a very powerful performance," said Grant Kippen, who was present at the meeting as the country director of the National Democratic Institute. "There really wasn't that much of an opportunity for debate. I remember the general feeling was that people were a little shocked. It seemed to be a done deal."

Khalilzad told me he didn't remember that particular meeting, but he said that the impetus for SNTV came from Karzai, and that whereas a lot of the experts had wanted him to pressure Karzai otherwise, he felt that the decision should be left to the president. "There were people who were saying to me and to others that we should force Karzai to accept this," he said. "It was also clear that the Afghan president and his people wanted a single-person vote rather than a party-based vote."

SNTV has made it harder for the parties that do exist to field candidates, and the weakness of parties has in turn eliminated a filter that could keep out the hundreds of candidates who run on identical platforms. At the time of the decision in 2004, there had been talk about moving toward a party-based system once Afghanistan's political culture matured. But parties have, predictably, only declined in power since then. What has matured in their place is a new, apolitical business class that has grown rich off the reconstruction by aligning itself with armed power brokers.

"We have our own words for democracy. In Dari, *mardum salari.* In Pashto, *woles waki.* They both mean 'rule of the people,'" Janan Mosazai, a thirty-year-old candidate for one of Kabul's seats, told me. He didn't think there was anything foreign or unusual about democracy. "Afghans understand what it means. It's something very basic, very intuitive."

We were sitting in his campaign office off of Qala-e Fatullah Road in Kabul. It was a place notably lacking in the cynicism that pervaded the capital, a place where you could sit cross-legged, sip tea, and exchange ideas with the bashful young men who so earnestly believed in Mosazai. "I heard him on the radio saying that he feared no one but God," a twenty-three-year-old named Zabiullah told me. He had been campaigning for Mosazai at his school.

Mosazai was a darling of the press, both Western and Afghan, for his clean reputation and reformist ideas. He stayed in Afghanistan throughout the civil war and Taliban periods, and worked for the U.N. and the BBC after 2001. In 2005, he moved to Canada, where he earned a master's degree, but unlike many of Afghanistan's brightest who had been able to secure foreign visas, he came back, in 2009. "I want my future to be in Afghanistan," he said.

Mosazai took me through the peculiar math of an Afghan election, and some of the absurdities wrought by the SNTV system. There were thirty-three seats up for grabs in Kabul province, and 664 candidates. The vote would be so fragmented that Mosazai, in an electoral district with 1.2 million registered voters, needed just 3,000 to 4,000 votes to get elected, and yet would have to fight very hard to come out ahead of other candidates with similar numbers. To eke out that minuscule but crucial lead, candidates were pouring money into their races, doling out cash to voters and village leaders, paying for mosques to be built, and holding lavish events. "It's amazing how much money people are spending in this election," Mosazai said. It was difficult to compete without access to lucrative contracts or personal wealth. Judging by the number of billboards they had rented, some candidates must have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars.

A member of parliament would have many opportunities to make that money back. It had become common for legislators to accept payments in return for their votes, particularly when it came to confirming Karzai's ministerial candidates. Shakiba Hashemi, one of three female parliamentarians from Kandahar province and an outspoken critic of the government, tells a story about receiving a phone call on behalf of a candidate for the interior ministry. "We have $5,000, are you going to vote for him?" The caller was mortified to have reached the wrong MP. (There is also a lawmaker named Shakila Hashemi.)

The money to pay off parliament for a ministerial appointment, which in the case of the most important ministries (and least savory ministerial candidates) might reach more than a million dollars, was usually provided by one of several powerful banks that had close links to the government. The banks had immense wealth to disburse, thanks to the billions of dollars the West had pumped into the country. Grassroots campaigns like Mosazai's were drowned in the flood of cash.

Driving back into Kabul after the election, I listened to Hanif Anyam and Sayed Faqruddin Faqri, two popular radio hosts, as they riffed on the new Wolesi Jirga:

Come on, parliamentarian dear, let's
prepare my bong.
We're going to celebrate.
You said you'd serve the people, but
you're serving yourself.
Are you telling the truth or not?
If you're telling the truth, I'll tear off my
shirt.

As the country waited for the preliminary results to be released, two weeks late, on October 20, international observers traded videos of ballot-stuffing like bootleg concert recordings. Mosazai and his young supporters had briefly been encouraged by a partial list that showed him in eighteenth place, but in the end he fell short by about a thousand votes.

"I'm certainly disappointed," he said. "Personally for myself and also for the fact that we could have witnessed a much different parliament qualitatively than what we are going to have."

Afghanistan's new parliament reflects the larger trends in the country since 2005. Nearly two thirds of incumbents lost: leftists, reformists, and the intelligentsia in particular were nearly wiped out. Those who took their places were often connected to warlords or to the country's wealthy business class—in Kandahar province, half of the newly elected MPs were owners of contracting companies with ties to the U.S. military. The results were the outcome not only of fraud and intimidation but also of voters' disillusionment with politicians who had little to show for five years in power.

Mosazai was astonished by the number of people he knew, young professionals and intellectuals, who didn't vote. "It's made me aware of the tremendous amount of work that we have got to do to get people to believe in democracy and believe in a better future."

The evidence of fraud was unmistakable: the IEC disqualified 1.3 million votes, nearly a quarter of the ballots cast. The commission was praised for taking on a bigger role than in past elections, but the figures it released didn't add up. The number of ballots cast went from an estimate of 4.3 million on September 21 to 5.6 million on October 20, with no explanation. The increase in ballots, strangely, roughly matched the number the IEC had already disqualified.

One senior staff member at the IEC told me he saw the preliminary vote tally several days before it was released. When the final version came out, he noticed that the list had changed substantially. "Some people disappeared and some people appeared on the list," he said, citing several examples. In every case, the name that gained a spot higher on the list was that of a powerful, well-connected figure.

In ethnically mixed provinces, a different problem presented itself. Hazara areas were generally secure, and many people voted there. In Pashtun areas controlled by the Taliban, no one voted—the only way for Pashtun candidates to get elected was by fraud. Thus Ghazni, a majority Pashtun province, has an all-Hazara slate representing it, and in Urozgan, the IEC threw out the votes from the Hazara polling center, clearing the way for two of the province's three representatives to be Pashtun. In Wardak, fraud affected nearly every polling center, resulting in a mixed slate of parliamentarians. It isn't clear which of the three outcomes could be called more legitimate.

As in the 2009 presidential contest, it's proved impossible to legitimize an election after the fact. The opaque disqualifications and adjustments made the vote seem both arbitrary and corrupt, particularly to ordinary Afghans, and neither the Afghan government nor the international community has shown much commitment to reforming the electoral system beyond shuffling the staffs of the IEC and the ECC.

In the meantime, fewer and fewer Afghans are bothering to vote, and those who do are often the proxies of more powerful figures. At the busiest voting center I went to on election day, I was allowed to walk with the officer in charge through the women's section, where voters were lined up in the hallway. It was so hot in the cramped space that many had their burkas flipped up on top of their heads. As we entered the hallway, the burkas were whipped down into place with a flutter. We pushed past the women into the voting room, and the officer shouted for the voters to leave, sending them scurrying back out into the hallway. There was a single soldier there, with a Kalashnikov across his knees, and four young female polling staffers who drew the tails of their head scarves across their mouths. We inspected their materials and asked a few cursory questions.

The voters in the hallway began to push through the door, and the officer told the soldier to get up and keep it closed. The women, no doubt tired of being crammed into the sweltering waiting area, were clamoring to vote, and we watched as the soldier struggled to close the door. As he leaned against it, the weight of the crowd squeezed one of the voters through and she popped into the room just before the door slammed shut.

She stood facing us, her back to the door. There was a moment of silence, and then we all burst out laughing. The girl couldn't have been more than twelve years old. She was tiny, with a burka pushed back across her shoulders.

"How old are you?" I asked. Eighteen, she responded. I asked to see her voter card, and she produced it. It had no photo. "What's your name?" I asked. "Marina," she said, tremulously, glancing at the strange men who stared at her like inquisitors.

After a pause, the soldier spoke up. "Okay, come on then," he said, beckoning her toward the table where she would cast her vote. ■