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Votes sell for about \$5 in Afghanistan as presidential race begins

By Hamid Shalizi

10/15/2013

MARCO, Afghanistan (Reuters) - Sayed Gul walked into a small mud brick room in eastern Afghanistan, a bundle wrapped in a shawl on his back. With a flick, he plonked the package onto a threadbare carpet and hundreds of voter cards spilled out.

"How many do you want to buy?" he asked with a grin.

Like many others, Gul left a routine job - in his case, repairing cars in Marco, a small town in the east - to join a thriving industry selling the outcome of next year's presidential elections.

Gul, who had a long, black beard and was dressed in the traditional loose salwar kameez, said he was able to buy voter cards for 200 Pakistani rupees each from villagers and sell them on for 500 rupees to campaign managers, who can use them in connivance with poll officials to cast seemingly legitimate votes.

From each card, Gul said, he made enough money to pay for a hearty meal like kebabs with rice, and maybe even a soda.

There are months to go until polling day on April 5, but many presidential candidates are already alarmed by the scale of the illicit trade in voter cards and questioning how legitimate the election will be. An election marred by more fraud than the last polls in 2009 will play into the hands of

Taliban insurgents and risk a breakdown of government as multinational troops pull out of the war-ravaged nation.

"When people buy and sell voter cards for the cost of lunch, it means that Afghan democracy is for sale," said Azizullah Ludin, who was the chairman of the Afghan election watchdog in 2009 and is now himself running for president.

The United States, which has led an international effort to restore democracy in Afghanistan since it helped oust the hardline Islamic Taliban regime in 2001, desperately wants the election to be the crowning moment of its presence before Western combat troops withdraw at the end of 2014.

The winning candidate will replace President Hamid Karzai, who is constitutionally barred from seeking a third five-year term. Among the candidates are his elder brother Qayum, former foreign minister Zalmay Rassoul, another former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah and a former Islamist warlord turned parliamentarian, Abdul Rab Rassoul Sayyaf.

Some of the candidates and their supporters were on opposite sides of the Afghan civil war in the 1990s and charges of fraud in the election could set off fresh tensions, strengthening the Taliban.

The threat of the insurgents, who oppose the election, was used at the last poll in 2009 to perpetuate widespread rigging, observers said.

Thomas Ruttig, the co-founder of the Afghan Analysts Network, described how a group of men claiming to be Taliban fighters stormed a polling booth in an eastern province when the vote was on. "Everyone fled. The ballot boxes were empty beforehand, and full afterwards," he said.

The nomination process for the 2014 poll ended only days ago, but the voter card trade is already starting to worry Western diplomats instructed to monitor the election for their governments.

While it may be difficult to measure the scale of fraud compared to 2009, security will clearly be a bigger threat to the process next year, according to Davood Moradian, the director of the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies.

"Last time, there was a degree of certainty about the security situation surrounding the election. This time because of the transition and withdrawing of international troops, the security will be more challenging," Moradian said.

THE TRADE IN BALLOT CARDS

Last week, a group of diplomats from various European embassies swapped stories over dinner about how easy it was to pick up a voter card.

One had first-hand experience, recounting how he had registered as a Panjshiri, or a native of the Panjshir Valley in the north, at a polling station in Kabul.