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Afghanistan in turmoil over presidential election result

By James Cogan

9 July 2014

The announcement on Monday that preliminary results show that Ashraf Ghani won the June 14 presidential election in Afghanistan has provoked immediate conflict with the power base of rival candidate Abdullah Abdullah. Abdullah has denounced the election as rigged, the purported result as “a coup against the will of people” and declared himself the victor.

Such is Washington’s concern over the situation that President Obama personally spoke with Abdullah to warn him against “resorting to violent or extra-constitutional measures” in response to the ballot-fraud allegations.

The final result is scheduled to be declared on July 24 and a new president inaugurated on August 2. However, the election, which was predictably but absurdly hailed by the Obama administration and other occupying countries as a great exercise in democracy, is now mired in charges of corruption and fraud.

According to the Independent Election Commission, over eight million votes were cast in the election—far more than observers estimated. Ghani, a former World Bank official who served as

a minister in the governments headed by retiring president Hamid Karzai, allegedly won 56.4 percent. Abdullah, who also served under Karzai but stood against him in the 2009 elections, won 43.5 percent based on the preliminary figures.

Abdullah's representatives are demanding that the ballots cast at more than 7,000 polling stations be reviewed and disqualified. They allege that as many as two million votes were stuffed into ballot boxes by the political forces that directed Ghani's campaign.

Even as US imperialist interests face a shipwreck in the Middle East as the Al Qaeda-linked Islamic State in Iraq and Syria takes over large parts of those countries, another debacle for Washington is unfolding in Central Asia. Just months before the bulk of American and NATO troops are slated to withdraw from Afghanistan, amid continuing popular resistance to the occupation, the two camps that have supported the 13-year US military occupation of the country are at each other's throats.

A veritable rogue's gallery of those who have enriched themselves under the occupation propelled Ashraf Ghani from relative obscurity to the status of president-elect. First and foremost, he was backed by the so called "Karzai cartel"—a collection of Pashtun-based tribal warlords and businessmen who sided with the US invasion and utilised Hamid Karzai's presidency to accumulate vast fortunes from the billions of dollars in American and international aid that has been pumped into Afghanistan since 2002.

There have been continuous allegations that political connections of the Karzai administration, including members of the outgoing president's family, are major players in the rampant production and export of opium and heroin that takes place in southern Afghanistan.

In Kandahar province, where the Karzai clan dominates the local authorities, Abdullah's supporters have cited as proof of fraud the fact that six times as many votes were cast on June 14—overwhelmingly for Ghani—than in the first round of the presidential election on April 5.

Ghani was also supported by warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum, who will become vice president if the result is upheld. Dostum rules over the ethnic Uzbek region of northern Afghanistan with an iron fist. His militia forces were responsible for numerous atrocities in both the 1990s Afghan civil war and while fighting on behalf of the US in the 2001 invasion. He has been repeatedly accused of directing and profiting from massive opium and heroin trafficking.

In 2009, Abdullah, with strong grounds, accused Hamid Karzai of rigging the elections. He was eventually persuaded by the Obama administration to accept the result. This time, however, his actions signal that the ethnic Tajik warlords who stand behind his presidential bid are not prepared to be blocked from power for a second time.

The Tajik powerbrokers formed the Northern Alliance in 1996 to fight the Islamist and Pashtun-based Taliban for control of the country. They supported the 2001 US invasion and have sought to extract everything they can from the occupation regime. Abdullah's statements indicate that they are seeking to at least whip the Ghani camp into line with the threat of a military coup or civil war. More than one third of the 200,000-strong Afghan National Army, at least 50 percent of its officers and most of the best trained special forces units are ethnic Tajiks, many with direct or family links to the former Northern Alliance.

The battle over the presidency is above all a fight for control of the shrinking pool of international financial support, which the pro-occupation Afghan elite have plundered. As much as 90 percent of Afghanistan's nominal Gross Domestic Product of \$34 billion stems from military spending or aid injections. As the US and NATO wind down their military occupation, the money flow is slowing. The US halved its civilian aid to \$1.12 billion this year. The \$16 billion in annual assistance pledged in Tokyo last year by other countries is not likely to materialise.

The reduction in the number of foreign troops from 130,000 in 2012 to 50,000 is also cutting across the interests of sections of the ruling elite close to the NATO occupation. Afghan security companies, most run by politically-connected strongmen and which provided base guards or escorts for supply convoys, are losing billions of dollars in contracts. Many people who eked out an existence providing services of one type or another to the foreign forces have lost their livelihoods.

By the end of the year, the US intends to reduce its forces in Afghanistan to just 9,800, confined to highly-guarded bases such as the key airfield at Bagram and the capital, Kabul. It appears that, as of 2015, the Afghan regime will have far less to dish out in terms of patronage than it did under Karzai.

All the claims that the US and its allies have established a regime based on democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights in Afghanistan are exposed as lies by the corrupt, dysfunctional and utterly dependent character of the political set-up that has been erected in the country. While unknown billions of dollars has found its way into the pockets of US stooges, the Afghan people have been subjected to constant war, repression and poverty. After nearly 13 years of occupation, unemployment stands at 35 percent, while close to 40 percent of the population live below the country's poverty line, in abject destitution and malnourishment.

The Taliban and other anti-occupation resistance organisations—who still exert sway over large areas, particularly of the ethnic Pashtun southern provinces—are set to be the major beneficiaries of the election crisis and the sordid in-fighting among the rival pro-occupation factions.