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## Heratis Sceptical About Election

By Mustafa Saber in Herat

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**Local say threats by insurgents and presence of foreign troops cast shadow over upcoming elections.**

“The elections are just symbolic,” said Farid Nasimi, 20, when asked if he is likely to vote on August 20. “Foreign countries make the real choice about who will be the next president.”

With just one month to go before the citizens of Afghanistan choose their leader for the next five years, the election campaign has swung into high gear. Posters seem to blanket every available space, political advertisements dominate the evening viewing hours, and the Independent Election Commission, generously backed by international money and personnel, is busily organising the daunting logistics.

But it may all be for naught if potential voters like Farid opt out of the process. More and more Afghans, young and old, are expressing disillusionment and frustration with the state of their country, and they do not seem convinced that an election will solve the problems. They are also concerned about their own safety during the vote; many are unwilling to risk their lives for a process they see as deeply flawed.

An informal survey in Herat, arguably Afghanistan’s most cultured and cosmopolitan city, revealed a lack of trust in the upcoming poll.

“We can’t put our lives at risk to elect a president who will be of no use to the nation,” said a government official in the Siyawoshan area in Gozara district, 20 kilometres west of Herat city, speaking on condition of anonymity. “None of my friends and relatives will vote.”

Siyawoshan is dominated by a local rebel commander, Gholam Yahya Akbari. A former mayor of Herat, as well as the head of the department of public works, Yahya took up arms after a disagreement with Herat’s former government, Sayed Hussein Anwari. He rules

Gozara district with an iron fist, and he has issued a decree that those under his control should not vote.

“The elections are haram (illegal according to Islam),” he said in a pamphlet distributed in May.

Yahya has attacked foreign forces in the area, targeting their local base. Three soldiers there have been injured in his raids, according to government officials..

The Americans have tried to capture or kill him many times.

“People must not take part in elections administered by the Americans,” he said. “Those who do participate in the elections will be punished.”

Other districts in Herat province may also face difficulty on election day.

Sayed Gul, 20, from Zarghon, said that opposition to the elections is running high. Zarghon, a largely Pashtun district, has seen a growing insurgency over the past year.

“Up until now not a single candidate has been able even to put up posters,” he said.

Sayed Gul would like to vote, but he is not at all sure that he will be able to.

“On election day armed men may very well try to prevent people from going to the polling stations,” he said.

A low turnout might well cast doubt on the legitimacy of the elections, as well as the status of the new government.

“One of the main problems for the elections is the lack of security,” said Abdul Rahman Salahi, a political analyst. “A large number of people who are eligible to vote might not be able to participate. If that is the case we can’t call it a free election.”

However, security officials say the situation is not as bad as it is portrayed by local residents.

“We have taken proper security measures,” said Colonel Abdurrauf Ahmadi, local spokesman for the Afghan National Police. “Opposition groups use propaganda, but it is not serious.”

There have been no major security incidents related to the elections, according to government officials.

“In all districts there is strong cooperation between security forces and public outreach officials,” said Mohammad Ibrahim Frozish, the head of the regional office of the election commission.

However one of the employees of the office, who asked to remain anonymous, says that they have received threats from opposition groups.

Another factor souring the public mood is opposition to the foreign forces. This reflects a

general feeling that the situation has not improved significantly since the fall of the Taliban nearly eight years ago. Instead, there is more and more crime, the population does not feel secure, and people are looking for someone to blame.

This could make life harder for the Americans, whose new policy on Afghanistan is based on winning hearts and minds.

“The international forces have taken our independence, our dignity and our tranquillity,” said Mohammad Tareq Nabi, a professor of religious studies at Herat University. “These elections are illegitimate in the presence of these forces.”

This view is echoed on the street.

“Foreigners will select a traitor who will follow their directions,” said Mohammad Yaqub, who delivers newspapers to government offices. “It is clear who the next president will be. So why bother the people?”

In Herat, as in much of the rest of the country, there is a general acceptance that the incumbent, President Hamed Karzai, has the election all but sewn up.

But not everyone is so negative.

Shukria Noorzai, 22, said that she will definitely vote, “It is an act of patriotism. Every Afghan citizen should fulfil his responsibility.”

Political analyst Abdul Qayum Qayum agrees.

“This is the situation we have in Afghanistan today,” he told IWPR. “Nobody can change everything overnight. So we just have to accept these difficulties and go to vote.”

This is just what Maryam Jami, 28, is counting on. She is from Gozara district, home of Commander Yahya, and is standing for election to the provincial council. The local elections will coincide with the presidential ballot. Maryam is determined to run, despite Yahya’s threats.

“I hope that the government and the opposition will reconcile one way or another, so that people can go and elect their representatives with a calm heart,” she said.