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## Wizards and wives drive Afghan election

By M K Bhadrakumar  
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Dr Abdullah Abdullah, the "modern face" of [Afghanistan](#), is a rare finished product to emerge out of the jihad of the 1980s - a handsome, nattily attired, English-speaking mujahideen spokesman who could evocatively bring to the Western drawing rooms the danger and the thrill of the Hindu Kush.

Slain Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud wouldn't think of losing him as his media manager and interpreter. Anyone who shook Abdullah's soft hands will at once discover he never held a Kalashnikov, although he would speak with great *elan* about the life and times of the mujahideen. That places Abdullah in a unique position to claim mujahideen pedigree, yet avoid being branded a "warlord".

There could be no better "mujahid" than him today to propagate the United States campaign against President Hamid Karzai. If Abdullah succeeds in deconstructing Karzai's alliance with the mujahideen "warlords" and forces the obdurate president into a runoff, that will surely be his finest hour.

However, Abdullah has a fight on his hands. Karzai, who is popularly known among Afghans as the "wizard" for his skills to politically outmaneuver opponents, won't abdicate. With official figures from 35% of the polling stations now in, The Associated Press has Karzai leading with 46.2% of the votes and Abdullah with 31.4%. Karzai must win over half the votes to avoid a run-off.

As days pass, the standoff gets messier and messier. The denouement - which can only come when the final vote count is released on September 17 - is certain to leave a lot of debris.

### 'Bush's wives'

So far, Karzai has had the last laugh. Contrary to the prognosis by US experts that the [presidential elections](#) would sharpen the Afghan ethnic divide and that a Karzai [election](#)

would throw up a "backlash" in the Pashtun-majority areas, nothing of the sort is happening. The Pashtuns have rejected Ashraf Ghani, former World Bank official and America's favorite candidate.

Despite being a blue-blooded Ahmadzai, one of the biggest tribes in eastern Afghanistan, the returns from Nangarhar show Pashtuns disfavor Ghani, though there exists probably an anti-Karzai Pashtun sentiment waiting to be tapped. In other words, Americans played the ethnic Pashtun card and it didn't work.

The US now will have to insert Ghani laterally into the power structure in a regime headed by Abdullah. But any such surgical strike necessitates a runoff, whereas Karzai is coasting toward victory.

What complicated the US plan was that the "wizard" fared far better than Washington estimated in the non-Pashtun regions where Abdullah was thought to have an "edge" by virtue of being half-Tajik. Karzai literally caught Washington unawares by getting Rashid Dostum to return from Turkey in the nick of time to garner his 10% Uzbek vote bank for Karzai, which proved decisive. (Dostum has since returned to Turkey so that the US cannot make an issue of his presence to vilify Karzai.)

Again, the "wizard" was spot-on when he drafted Tajik leader Mohammed Fahim and Hazara Shi'ite leader Karim Khalili as his vice presidential nominees. Available results from northern and central provinces (Takhar, Badakhshan, Kunduz, Baghlan, Balkh, Jowzjan, Sar-e-Pol, Bamyan, Parwan and Kabul) indicate Abdullah trailing Karzai by 10%. Abdullah's performance has been outstanding only in his native Panjshir province, where he secured 87% of the vote, and in nearby Parwan province, where he polled 63%.

Karzai's mandate needs to be seen as cross-ethnic, as Abdullah too had fielded an ethnic Hazara, Charagh Ali Charagh, and an ethnic Pashtun, Humayoon Wasefi, as his running mates. It is obvious that Fahim swung huge Tajik support for Karzai, while Khalili (and Mohammed Mohaqiq) won Hazara support for Karzai, even as Dostum delivered Uzbek votes. (In the 2004 election, Dostum polled 11% of the vote as a candidate.)

Thus, all-in-all, Karzai's spider-like web of alliances with "warlords" in the northern, northwestern and central provinces proved no match for Abdullah. Evidently, what toppled the US apple cart was Washington's over-estimation of the "Pashtun base" of Ghani and the "Tajik base" of Abdullah. Some heads should roll in AfPak special representative Richard Holbrooke's team.

The US erred in assuming that with his urbane World Bank background, Ghani would prove irresistible to alienated Pashtuns. On the contrary, Pashtuns resent well-heeled Afghans who stay away to pursue careers in Western capitals and in any case, they reject anyone they think is being imposed on them by Washington.

Jeffrey Stern, whose dispatch from Jalalabad appeared in Slate magazine, wrote: His [Ghani's] reputation as an academic, technocrat and reformer is close to sterling, but his international appeal plays to a narrative Afghans are programmed to reject. In a country that has been a stepping-stone for empires and a chessboard for foreign interests, politicians with external ties are to be watched closely. On the streets of Kabul, I have variously heard Ghani dismissed as "not Afghan"; a "foreigner"; and, most charitably, "an intellectual, yes, but not

presidential". By default, his extended furlough in the West has relegated him to the political purgatory Afghans devise colorful names to describe: *Zana-e-Bush*, literally "Bush's wives"; or *sag-shuyan*, "dog washers," for the lowly vocations the privileged classes surely filled while overseas.

Again, Abdullah effectively capitalized on his association with Massoud ("Lion of the Panjshir"), but that's his optimal performance. Abdullah hasn't offered any program, nor has he a record to prove he can do better than Karzai or is capable of the political reach to get a pan-Afghan mandate to lead his country.

Unlike Ghani, however, Abdullah's Afghan-ness may be hard to question. Most important, Abdullah's appeal among Panjshiris is proven. True, Mohammed Atta, the "warlord"-governor of Balkh (who is a rival of Dostum) supports Abdullah. Therefore, if somehow all "anti-Karzai" votes coalesce around him, and if Dostum can be forced to stay away, all is not lost and Abdullah can still give Karzai a run for his money in a runoff.

At least, that's what Holbrooke and his team think. However, for that to happen, a runoff is needed. As things stand, the results are still expected from western and southern Afghanistan. Abdullah will fare poorly in these regions. Ismail Khan, the legendary "warlord" known as the "amir" of western Afghanistan, backs Karzai to the hilt. As regards southern provinces, they are Karzai's native turf. And the Kandahari tribes are notoriously parochial.

### **'Obama's wives'**

Unsurprisingly, therefore, Washington has reached the conclusion that the only way left to stop Karzai from snatching victory will be by making the election process controversial. Washington has abruptly backed away from what President [Barack Obama](#) hailed as "this historic election". The emphasis is on running down the election process and to "delegitimize" the result. Every word spoken by Abdullah goes to build up a case to annul the [election result](#).

The US is pinning hopes on the so-called Election Complaints Commission (ECC), which is stacked with its nominees, to decide "how substantive the election fraud was" - to quote New York Times. The ECC is a body appointed by the [United Nations](#), but that's a fig leaf - just as the US-led foreign [troops](#) in Afghanistan operate under UN mandate. Given the ECC's composition, it will not disregard Abdullah's complaints.

A flashpoint could arise within the coming fortnight when the Independent Election Commission (IEC), an Afghan body, might declare Karzai as the outright winner and the ECC, which is dominated by the US, annuls the result on account of Abdullah's allegations. The US intention is to supersede the IEC and conduct the runoff under the supervision of the "international community" and the UN - that is, return to the 2004 mode and proceed to declare that "democracy" won in Afghanistan, while fixing the election result to ensure the Abdullah-Ghani tandem comes to power.

This is smart thinking. The bottom line is that the Obama administration cannot brook a Karzai victory. It is a moot point whether or not Karzai gave a dressing down to Holbrooke and the latter walked out of last week's presidential lunch in Kabul. When the two sides floated different versions - with Kabul sources maintaining Karzai put Holbrooke on the mat

and Washington clarifying "no one shouted, no one walked out" - what emerges is that the Obama-Karzai dalliance is all but over.

Helene Cooper of the New York Times wrote, "Whatever the case [of the lunch], the atmosphere may now have become so poisoned between the United States and Mr Karzai that the Obama administration will be hampered no matter what course it takes." The Sunday Times commented that the "fiery" lunch meeting "appears to have plunged American-Afghan relations to a post-Taliban low". The newspaper reported that Holbrooke would be meeting his British, French and German counterparts in Paris on Wednesday and according to an unnamed French official, "Holbrooke wanted a run-off in order to chasten Karzai and show him his power was limited."

But time is running out. The top US commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, is expected to deliver his assessment of the Afghan situation to Obama some time this week. McChrystal is laying the groundwork for a request for more US troops. Meanwhile, the continuing political stalemate in Kabul means the Afghan [government](#) is not on board for such a crucial phase of the war.

Ironically, it was left to Lord "Paddy" Ashdown, who almost took up Holbrooke's job as the point-person for the Western alliance in Kabul, to point out in an interview with the BBC on Friday that any American effort to "delegitimize" the Afghan elections means that the "capacity of our effort to win back the Pashtun tribes from the Taliban is lessened. And the people who are likely to benefit the most will be the Taliban themselves." Ashdown added: The bottom line of our failure in Afghanistan, and we must be prepared to look failure in the face now, did not lie in the inadequacies of Karzai. It lies in our complete inability in the international community to get our act together and to speak with a single voice; to have a clear plan ... and a clear set of priorities. If we want to put a finger at the failure in Afghanistan, then we should point at ourselves [rather] than at President Karzai.

Karzai insists he is the rightful winner of the Afghan presidential elections and he isn't prepared to face a runoff to satisfy American demands. And the mujahideen "warlords" are backing Karzai. In such a situation, if the Obama administration forces the issue, the great danger is that an altogether new political dynamic will emerge, compounding the already existing challenge of a full-fledged insurgency.

Most certainly, an Abdullah-Ghani tandem cannot hold Afghanistan together. The two "technocrats" may be good in their respective fields of expertise - media management and developmental economics. But they are not men of destiny who can lead from the barricades when the enemy is at the gates. The Obama administration must show the sagacity to cooperate with Karzai's strategy to involve the conventional power groups since no one else has the power today to control the Afghan system and preside over the fragmented polity and at the same time carry on with the fight against al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

Dangerous times lie ahead. The Obama administration should know that assuming Holbrooke has his way to "chasten" Karzai, the Afghan president would be worth nothing. The Afghans will nickname Abdullah and Ghani as *Zana-e-Obama* - "Obama's wives" - and how does that help McChrystal's war strategy?