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Western export of the ballot box elixir is pure hubris

**The absurd expectation heaped on Afghanistan's election is a fig leaf for leaders
seduced by the allure of military power**

Simon Jenkins

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Why can't Afghanistan be more like Sweden? It is insufferable that this miserable statelet can reject liberal democracy despite the efforts of 70,000 Nato and NGO staff kicking their heels in Kabul's dust for eight years. We have blown \$230bn of US and UK taxpayers' money and left [1,463 soldiers dead](#). Everything has been tried, from gender awareness courses to carpet-bombing Tora Bora. Thousands of Afghans have been massacred. Yet still the wretches won't co-operate. They even fiddle elections.

That sums up the west's response to the [election](#) staged last August by the Afghan ruler, Hamid Karzai. His decision yesterday to run a second round in two weeks has been greeted in Washington and London with an outburst of relieved congratulation. He may have had no option, but he had been raining on Nato's parade.

The abuse and now the expectation heaped on this presidential election are absurd. It is as if Kandahar were a precinct of Boston or a ward of Sutton and Cheam. In a country awash with guns, drug lords, suicide bombers, aid theft and massive corruption, that a few ballot boxes might have been stuffed and returning officers suborned hardly qualifies as indictable crime. The fact that Karzai has been able to win any sort of legitimacy is amazing, with the Taliban controlling half the provincial districts and Nato incompetence reducing turnout in the south to somewhere near 5%.

Nato and the UN were warned well in advance that the election would be rigged, yet their synthetic fury and that of the western media led to the sacking of a capable UN official. The rigging has frozen a decision on reinforcements by Washington's national security council, plunging troops at the front into greater danger. And why? The US would have better deployed its dominance in Kabul by demanding a coalition government rather than another costly election.

Power in a dysfunctional state seldom lies with any representative of the majority. Ever since Washington flew Karzai back to Kabul in 2002, he has received billions of dollars in aid money, which he has shrewdly used to barter deals with tribal chiefs and provincial commanders. Afghanistan has never enjoyed unified central government, but what it has emanates from Karzai's status as agent for the occupying power. If America is content for him to squander money on clinging to power, bribing Taliban and fuelling a narco-economy, why is it so fastidious about election rigging?

The answer, of course, lies not in Afghanistan but in Washington and London. This war, like all hopeless wars, is haemorrhaging popularity. From the moment Obama adopted Afghanistan as "his war" and allowed himself to be led by David Petraeus – that most dangerous of generals, a clever strategist – he was engulfed by the siren call of glory. He is now truly trapped.

Since glory resolutely refuses to show her face, American voters must be given a proxy. It is that they are rescuing the Afghans from their worse selves by "being given democracy", much as Victorian Britons gave them God and the Queen. It was compensation for Kipling's white man's burden, and its *"old reward: / The blame of those ye better, / The hate of those ye guard"*.

If Osama bin Laden cannot be found, if the Taliban cannot be eliminated, if troops cannot be withdrawn, if victory cannot be declared, then western leaders must find a reason for soldiers to die. Like Crusaders of old, they are told to die for the sacrament of a holy grail, in this case the franchise. Therefore it must not be desecrated by dodgy registers, fabricated returns and bought voters' lists.

It does not matter to the British people how the Afghans choose to conduct an election. It does not matter how one of the poorest countries in the world chooses to govern itself under the UN charter of self-determination. Few elections outside western democracies bear much scrutiny. We still hold our noses and deal with Iran, Kenya, Zimbabwe and Russia.

The excuse that we are preventing another 9/11 is ludicrously thin. That event, whose plotting and training were in Europe and America, will cause the US to spend what Congress puts at a staggering \$1.3 trillion in wars and related security by 2019. And still no one has arrested Bin Laden. It must be the most extravagant punitive expedition to the Asian mainland since Agamemnon set off for Troy.

The impact on international affairs has been devastating. British foreign secretaries – not least David Miliband – strut the press conferences of the world declaring "what we want to see" in regimes that are no business of Britain. In a BBC interview yesterday, the former Lib Dem leader Paddy Ashdown spoke of what "we" should do in Afghanistan as if it were in his old Somerset constituency. Every inch the liberal imperialist, he seemed to think we owned it.

We need look no further for an answer to the question posed by the American pundit [Richard Haass](#). Surveying the wreckage of the Clinton/Bush/Blair years last summer, he asked why the west had squandered the legacy of its victory over communism. It had shifted Russia from humiliating defeat to chauvinist belligerence. It had antagonised half the Muslim world. It had left Europe squabbling and protectionist. China had risen to astonishing commercial power. America had beggared itself with military spending. In sum, the architects of victory had shot themselves in the foot.

The west is not under any threat that remotely justifies this wreckage. Instead, weak politicians, bored by domestic ills, have seized on any passing threat to boost their standing at home by fighting small wars abroad and making them big. That Obama should dash his store of popularity against the mud walls of Kabul is astonishing; no less so that Brown, not a stupid man, should insult his voters by declaring that "the safety of the streets" requires soldiers to die in their hundreds in Helmand.

Western leaders seem unable to resist the seduction of military power. They think that, because they could defeat communism and fly to the moon, they can get any poverty-stricken, tin-pot country to do what the west decides is best for it. They grasp at nation-building, that make-work scheme of internationalism against which any people, however pathetic, are bound to fight. All is hubris. The arrogance of empire has mutated into the arrogance of liberalism.