

## The Scouting Report: Afghanistan's Election

The first round of the Afghan presidential election has just ended with current President Hamid Karzai and his former foreign minister, Abdullah Abdullah, both declaring victory. The final results of these elections will weigh heavily not only on the future stability of Afghanistan, but also on regional and international security. This, as Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, described a deteriorating situation in Afghanistan with the Taliban gaining strength.

On Wednesday, August 26, just after returning from an observation trip to Afghanistan, Brookings expert Michael O'Hanlon answered questions about that country's election in a live web chat with Fred Barbash, senior editor of *Politico*.

The transcript of this chat follows.

**Fred Barbash-Moderator:** The first round of the Afghan presidential election has just ended with current President Hamid Karzai and his former foreign minister, Abdullah Abdullah, both declaring victory. The final results of these elections will weigh heavily not only on the future stability of Afghanistan, but also on regional and international security. This, as Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, described a deteriorating situation in Afghanistan with the Taliban gaining strength.

Brookings expert Michael O'Hanlon is with us today to answer your questions about that country's election.

Welcome Michael. Welcome readers. Let's get started.

**12:30 [Comment From Daniel Lippman]** Michael-How worried are you about a drawn-out run-off election in Afghanistan and/or one major candidate not accepting the legitimacy of the vote? Abdullah Abdullah has said there was major "fraud"? Also, what does this whole electoral process mean for the ISAF and US troops fighting on the ground? Will the next President of Afghanistan be able to make the hard decisions about corruption and good governance needed to help win against the Taliban?

**12:32 Michael O'Hanlon:** Thanks for the question Dan. I would welcome a runoff but consider it relatively unlikely. It would delay formation of a new government, of course, but it would probably help Afghans believe in their democracy. Yes I am worried about fraud--though in what I saw last week, the larger problem was low turnout due to a combination of fear and apathy. That said, there were good things about this election that I'll surely get into in another answer.

**12:32 [Comment From Zack]** In her most recent article Jean MacKenzie claimed that President Karzai will undoubtedly receive 50% of the vote, thus negating a second round of voting. Do you think that is likely?

**12:34 Michael O'Hanlon:** As a person who helped monitor the election with IRI, I probably shouldn't spend too much time on predictions--we need to support the process. That said, Karzai polled 45 percent before the vote, so he has a chance. Also his bringing the Uzbek leader Dostum into his camp just before the vote probably helped more (for getting votes, NOT for improving the character of his coalition). So it's hard to say, and up in the air, about whether he gets 50 percent. I am heartened by the seriousness with which the independent IEC and ECC (Independent Election Commission, Election Complaints Commission) take their jobs.

**12:35 [Comment From Andrei]** We've heard the media call voter turnout both a success and a failure. What is your opinion?

**12:36 Michael O'Hanlon:** turnout was on balance a disappointment, numerically, in my eyes. more encouraging were the quality of the campaign, the professionalism of election workers, the competence of the army and police on election day, and yes the commitment of those 20 to 30 percent of Afghans (my estimate, not IRI's) who did vote. But numerically those latter figures are still a bit of a disappointment.

**12:36 [Comment From Jeff (DC)]** There is an interesting commentary on ForeignPolicy.com today with 10 essential questions regarding our continued involvement in Afghanistan. There was one that struck me particularly and I'd like to hear your opinion: Is a Taliban takeover of Afghanistan inevitable without a significant American presence on the ground? Or might some other form of aid to the Karzai regime be sufficient to stave off that eventuality?

**12:37 Michael O'Hanlon:** the Taliban are certainly far and away the strongest movement in southern Afghanistan. So yes I think they'd clearly prevail there. In other parts of the country, things could be different. We could wind up back in the early 1990s, so to speak, with a splintered country divided amongst various warlords and factions, and perhaps a rump government holding on in places too. Regardless, not a pretty picture to contemplate.

**12:37 [Comment From Elsie]** Is a truly stable political process in Afghanistan foreseeable at all?

**12:39 Michael O'Hanlon:** On balance I think the process itself was actually ok this time, despite fraud in places, and Karzai's abuse of the state-run media. But process-wise, there was more good than bad. Turnout-wise, more bad than good. And in terms of the quality of the candidates and their platforms, a very mixed bag.

**12:39 [Comment From Ethan]** What can Afghans do to help themselves?

**12:41 Michael O'Hanlon:** Starting at the top, Karzai needs to fire a few of the worst of the worst in his government. Key ministers who are themselves honest need to replace corrupt officials below them with better people, at a pace and to a degree they are comfortable with--but still, generally faster than they've been doing. Citizens who are in places where the government can protect them, and their way of life, need to make the right choice and support the government rather than the resistance. This is generally doable, and generally starting to happen, in places where the Afghan government plus NATO have begun to establish sufficient security and law and order--but it needs to happen much more, in many more places.

**12:42 [Comment From Troy Schneider]** I'd like to echo a question Bernard Finel asked yesterday in a post on ForeignPolicy.com ([http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/08/25/doubting\\_afghanistan?page=0,1](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/08/25/doubting_afghanistan?page=0,1)): "Is it possible to conceive a political process in Afghanistan that will provide lasting stability that does not require some negotiations with the Taliban?"

**12:43 Michael O'Hanlon:** Yes. The Taliban as such are vicious and formidable foes with an unacceptable ideology. I don't see negotiating successfully with Mullah Omar. But I do see the possibility of getting lots of the "\$10/day insurgents," or what David Kilcullen compellingly calls "accidental guerrillas," to shift sides at the grass roots level (through lots of local negotiations, not a grand deal). These people, I'd argue, aren't really Taliban.

**12:43 [Comment From Adam]** Realistically, were there any national figures (who didn't run) who might have been able to unseat Karzai?

**12:44 Michael O'Hanlon:** Some people mention Jalali but I'm not sure. Karzai is a pretty good politician. That said, he hasn't won yet.

**12:44 [Comment From Beth]** Do you think Osama Bin Laden is still at large? Or do you think he has died?

**12:44 Michael O'Hanlon:** At large. Same for Zawahiri.

**12:46 [Comment From Bhagya/Singapore]** Hello Michael. What do the election and the likelihood of Karzai's return to power mean for regional security, for Pakistan and India?

**12:46 Michael O'Hanlon:** The stakes here were modest. The bigger question is whether democracy can survive in Afghanistan, and whether the insurgency can be defeated--and the election per se didn't provide a lot more information with which to answer that question. The voting was moderately important but not hugely important, I'd argue.

**12:47 [Comment From Roger]** Is there anything that the U.S. Government could have done better in supporting and protecting the people throughout this election process?

**12:48 Michael O'Hanlon:** The main problem is where we stand in the war, not so much in what we could have done better this spring/summer tactically. On balance, recent operations as well as the election day performance of Afghan and NATO security forces have been fine--but that's no great solace in light of broader trends, if you see the distinction that I'm trying to make.

**12:48 [Comment From Yan]** It seems like an insurmountable task to secure the tribal regions of Afghanistan. What do you think?

**12:49 Michael O'Hanlon:** Maybe, but most Afghans hate the Taliban and most want stability--and 60 percent were actually again pro-US in a recent poll (admittedly the numbers were probably lower in the south, but still, we aren't detested the way we often were in Iraq). So yes I think there's a good chance of at least moderate success.

**12:49 [Comment From Reid (Detroit)]** In the run up to the election, former finance minister and one of Karzai's main rivals Ashraf Ghani branded the Karzai's a mafia family, "Karzai Incorporated."

Did the West misjudge his character — or did it make it impossible for him to rule? With so many shady characters in his government, what will the US do about corruption?

**12:50 Michael O'Hanlon:** The US has been somewhat down on Karzai for a year but we didn't get to vote in these elections so I'm not sure we had any clear options. However we do need to find a way to cajole and pressure him to start firing the worst of the worst (like Dostum and Shirzai), even if we ourselves need to appreciate the challenge he faces in trying to reunite a country that has been so divided by war even as he has a fairly weak army and police and justice system with which to do the uniting.

**12:51 [Comment From Joanna]** I read that women's votes were "particularly vulnerable to manipulation" in last week's election, with large numbers of women registering to vote in areas where women are not known to be liberated. Do you have any thoughts on this or the women's role in the vote in general?

**12:51 Michael O'Hanlon:** Turnout for women was about 1/5 that of men in Kabul in the places I visited. The key problem was fear. I don't think women were more afraid than men; I just think men asked women to stay home given the climate on the streets. At least that's what a bunch of them told me, when I asked on Thursday.

**12:52 [Comment From Teddy]** Will we ever see the direct election of provincial governors by the people of Afghanistan?

**12:53 Michael O'Hanlon:** Maybe but there are pros and cons to this. Direct elections would tend to empower some local warlords since they have "political machines" already. So it's a tough call. The alternative might be to keep hiring/firing power in the president's hands but oblige him to gain approval for candidates, and for any decisions to fire people before the end of a given term, through some kind of oversight and vetting board.

**12:53 [Comment From sly steedman]** Is Afghanistan to Obama as the escalation in Vietnam was to LBJ?

**12:55 Michael O'Hanlon:** I don't think so, but then again, it's early for Obama.

Two points of comparison though: In Vietnam, average annual fatalities among civilians were over 100,000 and maybe two to three times that. In Afghanistan they are 2,000 to perhaps 5,000-- meaning the country is less violent than Colombia, South Africa, Russia, Mexico, Iraq. Second, in this war we have lost 800 troops. That's far too many, but we lost that many every two months (or less) in Vietnam. And we still have most Afghans on our side even after all this time. So the analogy isn't very compelling to me overall.

**12:55 [Comment From David]** What exactly is the Taliban hoping to achieve through terrorism in Afghanistan? Are they simply trying to get control of the country or is there another goal involved?

**12:55 Michael O'Hanlon:** Yes I think the Taliban wants to run the country again, as before.

**12:55 [Comment From Mike]** What is the degree of overlap between traditional Pashtun culture in Afghanistan and the type of Islam promoted by the Taliban? What are the implications of this for the future?

**12:56 Michael O'Hanlon:** The Taliban is an extreme, ruthless, harsh version of traditional Islam from the Pashtun areas. In fact it is so extreme as to be a perversion of it, not a reflection of it, in my estimation.

**12:56 [Comment From Hudson]** What do you think of Gen. McChrystal's call for more troops?

**12:57 Michael O'Hanlon:** He hasn't made it yet, and if he does, I'd advocate that he do it personally, in Washington. He understands the war, and the potential need for more resources, far better than Sec. Gates or Adm. Mullen or even Gen. Petraeus, I'd argue.

**12:57 [Comment From Raul]** Can you briefly explain the purpose of your recent trip to Afghanistan and talk a little about what you accomplished/observed while you were there?

**12:58 Michael O'Hanlon:** My main purpose was to help observe the elections with the International Republican Institute, one of several American groups (together with groups from Europe and elsewhere) helping monitor the elections. I then took advantage of being there to hold numerous meetings with key folks at ISAF and elsewhere.

**12:58 [Comment From Jay]** Do you think whoever ends up winning the election will be able to hold his ground once it's all over? Do you think a coup would be possible?

**12:59 Michael O'Hanlon:** A coup seems unlikely but alas assassination attempts are plausible (and have occurred before).

**12:59 [Comment From Wesley]** I'm interested to find out what kind of platforms the candidates ran on. What kind of campaign promises did they make? What's on their agendas?

**12:59 Michael O'Hanlon:** Abdullah wants direct election of governors. Ghani wants to focus on several model provinces as "ink spots" for successful counterinsurgency and governance. Karzai alas has a somewhat less clear message, I sense.

**12:59 [Comment From Margot]** What does an Afghan leader have to do to win the support of his country's people? What does he have to do to be considered legitimate in his country?

1:00 Michael O'Hanlon: improve the security environment, improve law and order, reduce corruption. Those are probably the biggest issues.

**1:00 [Comment From Fran]** It seems like Americans are becoming more optimistic about the situation in Iraq and less optimistic about Afghanistan. Why do you think this is the case?

**1:02 Michael O'Hanlon:** Because Americans are right! As are you.

Afghanistan is not hopeless, but it's not getting better yet. However I have a slight issue with Admiral Mullen's characterization of the situation as continually deteriorating. Things haven't gotten better overall yet, I agree, but I think there are rays of hope in those places where we have deployed more forces--and that's the only basis for staying the course (or requesting yet more troops), so I'd encourage the Admiral to modify his message somewhat. Again, I think Gen. McChrystal would do a better job because he'd be more nuanced and detailed.

**1:02 [Comment From Paul]** What was the Afghan media's role in the election?

**1:03 Michael O'Hanlon:** the state run media promoted Karzai (as documented by independent watchdogs). The private media, which a lot of people watch or listen to, did a very good job (not much internet yet; Fred, can you fix that before the next Afghan election!?!?)

**1:04 Fred Barbash:** Haha. I'll see what we can do.

**1:04 [Comment From Laura B.]** Can you explain Obama's plan for Afghanistan and how it might differ from President Bush's?

**1:06 Michael O'Hanlon:** Let me give 3 main points for starters (recognizing that Bush in 2008 was finally headed this way himself in many ways, but 6 years too late):

- lots more resources (twice as many US troops)
- a focus on protecting the population (especially now under General McChrystal)
- a focus on building up robust Afghan institutions (army, police, courts, etc.) whereas Bush/Rumsfeld had tried to avoid "nation building" for many years

**1:06 [Comment From Debbie (UT)]** How should the next Afghan president go about improving security and reducing corruption?

**1:07 Michael O'Hanlon:** On security, beyond what is already planned, the key issue yet to be well addressed is law and order--finding a way to blend tribal justice systems with the under resourced and underequipped formal court system on corruption, there are lots of things you do (set up ombudsman, increase transparency, improve police salaries, etc.) but in the end you have to fire the worst of the worst to send a message. Karzai hasn't done that yet.

**1:07 [Comment From Wesley]** On the subject of campaign promises - did any of the candidates focus on infrastructure or rebuilding?

**1:08 Michael O'Hanlon:** I confess to not knowing their ideas in detail. Ghani did. Beyond that, I believe most of what we got was vague rhetoric, but that may be slightly unfair.

**1:08 [Comment From Christine Pelosi]** Michael, a few questions on the economy, please: what were the candidates offering in the way of economic promises? When there, did you see prospects for economic development unrelated to the opium trade? If so, what were they?

**1:09 Michael O'Hanlon:** Again, I'm somewhat limited in knowledge here, but to add one more point and in partial fairness to the president, Karzai has been working to improve relations with Pakistan, with one possible benefit being greater regional economic integration and cooperation.

**1:09 [Comment From Greg]** What sort of condition are our troops and military equipment in? Are we ready for increased presence in Afghanistan? Aren't we sort of "beat up"?

**1:11 Michael O'Hanlon:** Equipment, etc. is fine, generally speaking. But as you imply, troops are tired; as one general told me once, "never have we asked so few to do so much for so long." That said, morale among those I saw (admittedly just officers on this trip) seemed solid. More generally, while the force shows lots of strain, it is also holding together pretty well at a collective level, and we can keep fighting this war if necessary. But of course, we are asking a lot of many individuals, and some are suffering enormously. So it's a mixed bag in that sense.



**1:11 [Comment From Kris]** What kind of support are Afghans getting from other countries?

**1:13 Michael O'Hanlon:** Some NATO allies are fighting hard--especially the UK and Canada, also France and the Danes and Dutch. Nor should one ignore the contributions of the Germans, Italians, Aussies, Norwegians, and others; our allies have collectively lost more than 500 soldiers in Afghanistan now, and even traditionally stable parts of the north and west are now more unsettled. So there are real contributions, even if they aren't really adequate.

**1:13 [Comment From Kris]** And what is the aid situation like? Is there currently food aid or other types of supplies essential for every day life getting to the Afghan people?

**1:14 Michael O'Hanlon:** Good question. There is lots of aid but much is uncoordinated, with dozens of donors doing their own thing to an extent, and no clear coordinating mechanism. The UN, World Bank, US, UK, EU and Germans and Japanese are among the key players. The government of Afghanistan has a master development plan now, but the donors do not have a master coordination plan. We need new ideas and mechanisms here; I favor a new position of international aid coordinator, myself.

**1:15 [Comment From Neal]** Are any large numbers of people fleeing Afghanistan currently? Are refugees a concern?

**1:15 Michael O'Hanlon:** Refugees coming BACK are a concern because they settle in cities and worsen the economic problems there and provide potential recruits for insurgents. But at this point I don't believe there is a big refugee outflow.

**1:15 [Comment From Ines]** What was the logic behind replacing McKiernan with McChrystal?

**1:16 Michael O'Hanlon:** McKiernan was pretty good but perhaps a bit traditional in how he saw his role; McChrystal is dynamic and intense and a superstar. We went from a B to an A in a war where you need the latter.

**1:16 [Comment From Glenn]** You mentioned that warlords would create problems in the direct elections of Governors. Don't the same warlords cause similar problems in national elections?

**1:17 Michael O'Hanlon:** Yes, in the sense that Karzai felt the need to reach out to some to secure a win. If he does win, though, he has to make sure that those who do truly egregious things are held accountable. I don't mean everybody with a whiff of corruption about them; again, I mean the worst of the worst.

**1:17 [Comment From Kyle]** Would you say that building a strong central government in Afghanistan is harder to accomplish than in Iraq?

**1:17 Michael O'Hanlon:** Yes, absolutely. Afghanistan has far fewer educated people, and far less a tradition of strong bureaucracy and central government.

**1:18 [Comment From Paula]** Do you think the American people are ready to witness another substantial war in the Middle East with the situation in Iraq yet to be totally resolved?

**1:19 Michael O'Hanlon:** Well, I think we have one, whether people like it or not! (If you consider Afghanistan the Middle East, and if that's what you're asking about.) I think the main point is that

Americans will expect President Obama to prove he has a workable and winnable strategy. If he does, Americans will generally give him the necessary support, I predict.

**1:19 [Comment From Paula]** And do you think Afghans are generally satisfied with their lifestyle?

**1:19 Michael O'Hanlon:** Measured against the past, they are moderately encouraged. Satisfied would perhaps be an overstatement, though.

**1:19 [Comment From James]** How did Afghanistan publicize the election and how did it educate its people on the importance/value of voting?

**1:20 Michael O'Hanlon:** Radio was first, TV second, word of mouth and rallies/jirgas/etc. third, from the information I saw. (Politico ranked 17th : - )

**1:20 [Comment From Wyatt]** Is Afghanistan's current leadership regime viable in the long-term?

**1:21 Michael O'Hanlon:** Not yet, there's too much corruption, Karzai needs to find a way to incentivize people to behave a bit better.

**1:21 [Comment From Wyatt]** What would success in Afghanistan look like?

**1:21 Michael O'Hanlon:** A strong enough government that they can continue the war largely on their own, with security good enough that the economy can function and gradually grow.

**1:24 [Comment From William (Brooklyn)]** Are there enough Afghans who oppose the Taliban enough to fight that they will actually be able to carry on the war by themselves?

**1:24 Michael O'Hanlon:** Yes, 90 to 95 percent typically oppose the Taliban in any poll (despite the intimidation factor)

**1:26 Fred Barbash-Moderator:** Michael: When Adm. Mullen tells us the situation is deteriorating.....how are we to take that coming from that level?

**1:30 Michael O'Hanlon:** To elaborate on my earlier point, I commend him for avoiding happy talk, and think he is mostly right substantively, but still find this discouraging. So will other Americans. If after adding 30,000 US troops this year we still haven't arrested the downward slide, how good can our strategy be, and how long should we really stay at it? I believe that we need to be able to talk about local successes in those places where we have added forces, and describe what that looks like--and then explain why enlarging and strengthening these "oil spots" can be expected to work. That's the part of the explanation that requires General McChrystal, and I think it needs to happen fairly soon, not after the health care debate wraps up. A negative narrative is starting to form on this war which the election won't be enough to counter, and that should create a bit more of a sense of urgency within the administration to better communicate its strategy than it appears to have done so far. Also, the strategy needs further refinement and more resources as well, I believe, and fairly soon. But again, that needs to be explained and explained well. Congress's skeptical questions are legitimate, even for those of us who support the current strategy.

**1:30 Fred Barbash-Moderator:** Michael: thanks so much. I think you set a record for number of answers during the course of an hour. And they were quality answers too. For that....our gratitude and thanks also to our readers, with apologies to those whose questions we could not get to.



Back here, same time, same place...next Weds.

So long for now.