



Making the 2014 Elections Count: Exploring Civil Society Concerns and Strategies

Summary

The Salah Consortium brought together over 600 civil society activists and concerned citizens (including 30% women) in four regional and one national workshop in the last three months of 2013 to identify community strategies to overcome challenges around the 2014 elections and make their votes count.

Afghan civil society actors from across the country endorsed the 2014 elections as critical for the future of the country and call on every citizen to help monitor and minimize misconduct.

Understanding the challenges of insecurity, potential electoral violence, low voter awareness and a high probability of fraud, both modern and traditional civil society members, young and old, men and women, declared their willingness to join efforts in order to enhance awareness about elections, decrease obstacles for women to vote, and minimize fraud and violence.

The government, candidates, major organizations and the armed opposition all have an important role to play in ensuring fair campaigns, informed political debates and an election day free from violence.

This policy paper outlines what civil society is prepared to do for the upcoming elections and what it expects from other actors.

1 Introduction

After more than a decade of significant diplomatic, military, political, and socio-economic, development and humanitarian efforts by international and national actors since the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan is at an important crossroads. For the first time since 2002, the country is facing a major political transition in the form of the 2014 election, with the incumbent President Karzai—having ruled Afghanistan for 12 years—constitutionally prohibited from running for a third term. This unprecedented democratic transfer of power, the first in Afghanistan's history, comes as the international community plans hand over all security responsibility to Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and withdraw nearly all of its troops.

Uncertainty over this simultaneous political and security transition has already led to a slowing of the Afghan economy as well as growing ethnic, tribal and regional mistrust. Caught in the middle during these uncertain times and silenced by over a decade of elite-oriented top-down decisions are ordinary Afghans—an often 'silent

majority’— at times neither able nor feeling empowered to have a role in a peaceful future for Afghanistan.

To simultaneously counter voter apathy and address concerns around elections, The Salah Consortium **organized over 600 civil society activists and concerned citizens** in four regional (East/Southeast/Central, West, South, and North) and one national workshop in the last three months of 2013 to identify community strategies to make the 2014 elections count. This policy paper presents the outcomes of all five workshops and the views of this diverse group of individuals from all over Afghanistan, including 30% women.¹

All participants were in favour of the 2014 Elections proceeding despite their collective disillusionment at how elections have been handled over the past decade. They felt it is important to continue the democratic process and emphasized the joint responsibility of the Afghan government and the Afghan people to ensure that elections are as transparent and fair as possible.

Civil society actors are eager to join forces and mobilize Afghan citizens to help them understand that every vote counts and that it is the responsibility of every individual to raise their voice about irregularities observed. Many felt that it was particularly important that women understood that they were free to vote for the candidates they liked. Civic activism was seen as long-term and should not stop on Election Day. Most participants felt that the road to democracy might be

long and rocky, but one worth travelling.

“Until six months ago, I hadn’t given the elections much thought, but then I looked around and saw that despite what all the politicians are saying a lot has actually been done in the last ten years and it was necessary that I vote to protect this.”

Female Student, Kabul

2 Elections Challenges

In order to identify areas for community activism, workshop participants first discussed key challenges surrounding the 2014 elections and then decided what they—and ordinary Afghans—could do to address them and what they expected from other actors, chiefly the Afghan government and candidates.

None of the challenges raised should come as a surprise, many reflecting the painful experience from past elections and an insufficient learning by those in charge of the electoral process. Overall they highlighted how past elections eroded the faith people had in the Afghan government to deliver a fair and transparent process.

“The government needs to send clearer messages that the elections will even happen. We have to resist calls for postponement, even if the weather is bad.”

NGO Coordinator, Bamiyan

2.1 Lacking Trust in Afghan Government to Deliver

Past elections have slowly eroded the faith people have in the Afghan government to deliver a fair and transparent election, or even hold elections to begin with. Workshop participants echoed findings in a recent study suggesting that less than half of all Afghans (39%) expressed some satisfaction with democracy in their country while one-third (33%) said they are dissatisfied and another third (29%) either had no opinion or refused to respond.²

There was limited trust in the Afghan government and Independent Election Commission (IEC) to adequately supervise and monitor candidate conduct, ensure the impartiality of election observers and monitors and, especially, reign in or prevent meddling by strongmen.

Government officials and Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) intentionally causing security incidents to create space to manipulate election outcomes was also a concern. Mistrust, however, did not stop at government, but also extended to the conduct of candidates, election observers and media.

Many logistical challenges were also raised—as was the government’s capacity to tackle them adequately—especially the insufficient number and also quality of polling sites, distance between polling sites and remote villages, insufficient number of ballots on polling day, impassability of roads during winter, and the lack of appropriate facilities and female staff for women voters.

This coupled with a concern over a low level of public and political awareness,

especially by women, added the general doubt that the upcoming elections will yield a fair and representative outcome.

2.2 Election Fraud

Fraud was seen as inevitable with any efforts—whether by government or local communities—only able to reduce misconduct but not totally eradicate it. Fraud, however, was not something exclusively seen as conducted by the Afghan government or IEC officials—though they clearly were considered the ones that should ensure this would not happen. The list of people interested in election outcomes was long.

Concerns raised by workshop participants ranged from the existence of fake voter cards to the interferences by strongmen and government officials as well as the stuffing of ballot boxes. Some even feared interference by foreigners, believing election outcomes were not decided inside Afghanistan but elsewhere. The latter made the effort of going to vote pointless. This view interestingly was held across different regions and professional groups, including the educated.

There was especially no faith in candidates playing fair during elections, meaning that they would let voters decide on merit who should be elected. Suspected misconduct included the mobilization of patronage networks, calling on ethnic/tribal vote blocs, buying votes, preventing voters from reaching polling sites by creating insecurity and stuffing ballot boxes.

There was also the fear of both irregular militia forces and also ANSF, influencing election outcomes. The role of the Afghan Local Police (ALP)

was seen as particularly suspicious, given that they had a greater geographic spread than other ANSF.

There was additionally little trust in the media being able to provide impartial and independent electoral coverage; and at times a critique of civic educators, who were said to be actually suggesting whom to vote for. The latter, however, was seen as coming from government-or candidate-organized civic educators rather than civil society.

2.3 Insecurity

Aside from an overall loss of confidence in an election free of dangerous irregularities, the drastically degrading security environment across the country made insecurity a key concern of workshop participants, and one that could negatively affect voter registration and voting on the polling day. This apprehension seemed particularly strong by citizens of Afghanistan's East, Southeast, and South, as well as parts of the West, and was less marked in participants from the North and Centre.

Interference by armed opposition groups intimidating voters, disallowing participation in elections, and creating an overarching aura of fear around elections was only one of many security concerns.

“Keep the militias from the polling sites. During the last elections, commanders were paid USD 6,000 to fire rockets at polling stations of rivals.”

Provincial Council Candidate Kunduz

For the first time, fears of tribal, ethnic or even sectarian violence were raised, linked to a perception that the

current narrative around elections no longer focussed on issues and platforms but focussed on patronage networks and manipulations to get elected. There was a concern that the composition of presidential teams strongly signalled that candidates no longer were taking the democratic process seriously but focussed on mobilizing ethnic and tribal votes.

Women in particular, constituting half of all voters, were principally concerned about their ability to vote in the first place—due to a mix of technical, security and cultural obstacles—and being able to cast a vote independent of, and secret from, their male family members.

“I am afraid if I vote differently from what my husband tells me, he will know.”

Female Participant from the Southeast

3 Tackling Challenges

Workshop participants stood united in not letting challenges discourage them from participating in elections. All were in favour of the 2014 Elections proceeding despite their collective disillusionment at how elections have been handled over the past several years. They felt it was important to continue the democratic process and emphasized the joint responsibility of the Afghan government and the Afghan people to ensure that elections are as transparent and fair as possible.

“The keys are security, good weather, and female participation. In Faryab snow may be a problem, but we cannot postpone the polls at this stage, we have to go forward.”

NGO Manager, Faryab

Elders, mullahs, journalists, women, youth, professionals and civil society activists acknowledged their responsibility to act, and act now.

While ordinary Afghan citizens and civil society actors understood that they may only be able to impact certain aspects of elections, they were willing to do as much as they could, proposing community strategies, both general as well as for specific actors.

All emphasized the following *principles for civil society engagement*:

Impartiality, transparency, and non-discrimination (ethnic, tribal, religious, gender, and regional).

Principally, all civil society actors and groups—each doing their part through their own groups and fora, including private and public gatherings—should continue their efforts in raising the awareness of as many Afghan citizens as possible—especially women—about the elections and emphasize the importance of every single vote.

“We need to continue to raise awareness not just of the elections, but of the democratic process. And we need more transparency from the government and demand a long term agenda.”

Shura Head from Kabul

Secondly, and equally if not more important, all actors and Afghan citizens should actively observe and monitor the election process as best as they can and report irregularities and fraud as well as call upon the Afghan government, candidates and other concerned actors to play fair. The motto was that if fraud was inevitable, at minimum it should be reported.

There was no clear consensus on how this was to be done best: some felt it was the role of media, other the role of mullahs and community leaders, while others felt it was the role of every individual to report to the IEC. The conducting of exit polling, however, was seen as too risky for the Afghan context.

3.1 Strategies for Religious and Community Leaders

Religious and community leaders, acknowledging their role as influential opinion shapers in society, especially in rural settings, were asked to encourage every citizen to vote and counter prejudice and misconceptions about the right of women to vote through references to Islamic texts.

They should also call upon all actors to refrain from violence and keep peace, and within their capacity and power, cooperate with the Afghan government on security provision.

“The government security forces need to work very closely with local communities to establish security around polling sites. Neither the government nor the internationals will be able to secure polling sites unless they reach out to communities as soon as possible to coordinate security.”

NGO Coordinator from Kunar

They should lecture and preach about the importance of national unity during elections, and the danger of igniting ethnic, tribal, religious and other divisions in society that could lead to violence. Finally, they could mitigate fraud by reminding communities of the unacceptability of these practices from the standpoint of

Islamic principles and honour in customary law.

“If this election fails and there is fraud, the nation will face a lot of problems.”

Mullah from Nangarhar

3.2 Strategies for Youth Activists

As the future and future leaders of Afghanistan, youth need to realize their connecting role to inform their families about elections and encourage them to utilize their vote to choose the most qualified candidate possible.

“The key is an active younger generation having a clear role in monitoring polling sites and raising awareness.”

Female Student from Kabul

As the ‘digital generation’ they should embrace and actively utilize social networking for election outreach and countering misconceptions about the incompatibility between existing traditions and human rights and democracy.

Last but not least, and possibly most importantly, they should actively participate in monitoring the election process, again possibly utilizing social networking to report irregularities and misconduct.

“The younger generations’ role is to vote, to observe and to complain.”

Reporter from Kapisa

3.3 Strategies for Women Activists

As already highlighted, mobilizing women to vote was seen as important for the upcoming elections, with everybody having a role to play. Women activists, however, were

recognized in their role as utilizing private gatherings, such as weddings and funerals, to network with other women, especially those excluded from the public space.

In addition to informing them about elections they should encourage their sisters to vote and support each other in overcoming cultural and logistical barriers. They should strike alliances with other actors to influence communities in general, especially men, not to prevent women from voting in order to capitalize on the additional 50% of votes women bring to elections.

Women’s role, however, should not only be restricted to mobilizing other women to vote, but—as those bearing children and giving life—more generally to influence society and reinforce the importance of peaceful change. Female workshop participants stressed the importance of communicating that elections are a peaceful way for Afghans to influence the political process—and ultimately the future of their country—regardless of wealth, influence, social standing, age (youth vs. elders), or gender.

“We must change the mindset of the people who didn’t win in the last elections and who are currently poisoning the process because they didn’t win.”

Female Activist from Herat

3.4 Media Strategies

Media, having the power to influence public opinion, was requested to use this ‘power’ wisely and responsibly by following the IEC code of conduct. They should utilize their outreach by providing background information about elections, voting, and all

candidates and their teams, especially their views on the future of Afghanistan. Rather than endorsing specific candidates, they should encourage candidate debates and offer platforms so that Afghan citizens can make an informed vote. And, wherever possible, they should provide a platform for reporting the concerns raised by ordinary citizens about election misconduct.

3.5 Strategies for Civil Society Organizations

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) were tasked to support all other actors through awareness raising, voter information and education. Religious and community leaders as well as youth and women called upon CSOs to build their capacity and understanding of the electoral process and outreach.

“The key is getting voting cards to the younger generation and especially women. Then we just need to raise awareness. Everything that we keep emphasizing we can make real.”

Female Student, Kabul

As long as the elections proceeded in an open and transparent fashion, civil society, in conjunction with the media and political parties, can be an effective and meaningful tool for communicating the concerns and needs of citizens to candidates. This recognizes civil society’s capacity to connect and mobilize the different elements and actors of Afghan society to join forces. CSOs’ role in coordinating election monitoring efforts was especially noted.

4 Recommendations for and Expectations from Other Actors

Conscious of the limits of civil society to influence all aspects of elections, workshop participants also voiced their expectations from other actors—the government, candidates, major organizations and the armed opposition—as all having an important role to play in ensuring fair campaigns, informed political debates and an election day free from violence.

The following requests, expectations and recommendations were put forth, with the longest list for candidates, given their role as future leaders. The latter were also presented with a list of questions they should clarify prior to elections.

4.1 Independent Election Commission

- To increase access to voter registration sites in remote areas, especially for women
- To transparently report the number of voter registrations per province
- To minimize electoral fraud
- To adequately monitor and safeguard the implementation of the Code of Conduct for Candidates, Media and Election Monitors
- To allow civil society to monitor every aspect of the electoral process, especially the vote counting
- To provide greater support to elections, including:

- boosting the number of female employees in polling sites to facilitate women's voting
- having sufficient electoral monitors (particularly at potentially problematic locations in remote areas)
- ensuring sufficient technical support for hard-to-access regions
- ensuring sufficient ballot slips
- ensuring long enough opening-hours in polling sites with large voter populations

4.2 Afghan Government Actors (including Afghan National Security Forces) at National, Provincial and District Levels

- Not to interfere in the democratic process
- Not allow the use of government resources and influence to support specific candidates or teams
- To keep corruption to minimum level possible by:
 - minimizing meddling from local strongmen and electoral officials
 - monitoring candidates' use of political influence and violence to manipulate elections
- To ensure adequate security at all election events/polling sites so that vulnerable groups, such as women, do not feel intimidated while voting
- To avoid ties to and favouring specific candidates
- To ensure own staff and militias do not engage in intimidation

4.3 Armed (Opposition) Groups

Not to interfere in the election process and allow people's vote and ensure that violence does not dictate

outcomes. They are requested to cease all voter intimidation and threats of violence (e.g., cutting fingers).

4.4 Presidential and Provincial Council Candidates

- To play their part to ensure fair and transparent elections by adhering to the IEC code of conduct
- To avoid the use of militias and force at the local level
- To avoid intimidation of voters
- To engage in a transparent and fair campaign without the use of negative propaganda
- Not to use ethnic, religious or sectarian narratives and campaigning
- To campaign based on a political vision for Afghanistan
- To engage in debates with each other and the Afghan population on key issues they would like to change if elected
- To comport themselves as responsible potential future leaders and start being accountable to the Afghan population right now
- Not to threaten or influence voters
- Not to buy votes or commit other fraud
- Not to disrupt security and public order
- Not to engage in power trading and illegal activities
- To refrain from blocking roads and disturbing people during electoral campaigns

- To be accountable for their expenses during the election campaign
- Not to campaign in government buildings, educational institutions and religious sites
- To respect the independence of international and national election observers
- To respect the freedom of media
- To engage frequently in public issue debates with other candidates
- To accept the results of the elections
- To keep peace and discourage electoral violence
- To present a working vision for Afghanistan's future on key issues-platform for next four years

Furthermore, for an informed political debate, presidential and provincial council candidates are kindly requested to share their views with civil society and media on the following core issues:

- 1) Addressing, fighting and preventing administrative corruption at all levels
- 2) Combating nepotism in government appointments
- 3) Ending the culture of impunity
- 4) Ending discrimination and providing social justice
- 5) Providing security, implementing rule of law and good governance
- 6) Safeguarding the rights of all Afghan citizens, especially women and minorities

- 7) Promoting women's participation in public life and appointing women into public offices
- 8) Promoting education and decreasing illiteracy
- 9) Provision of health care to all Afghan citizens
- 10) Plans for peace and reconciliation and ending the war
- 11) Strengthening national unity
- 12) Economic and political relationships with
 - a) Afghan neighbours
 - b) International community
 - c) Islamic countries
- 13) Economic progress/boosting Afghan economy, especially the exploration of natural resources, including rules and regulations around mining/preventing illegal mining
- 14) Job creation and decreasing unemployment

Endnotes

¹ Women's participation varied between the regional workshops, with the highest in the West (45%) and the lowest in the South (13%) and averaged out to 30%. Each workshop was around 100-120 participants, with Kabul being double. Participants included civil society and political activist as well as more traditional religious and tribal leaders, aiming at ensuring an inclusion of both women and youth in order to increase the multiplication potential by participants.

² 16.5% are very and 22.5% fairly satisfied, while 4% believe there is no democracy in their country; *A Survey of Public Perception on Elections and Civic Education in Afghanistan—Data Report*; Democracy International and National Center for Policy Research (NCPR); (Kabul: April 2013); <http://democracyinternational.com/sites/default/files/EC%20Survey%20Data%20April%202013%20-%20final.pdf>

Salah is a Consortium founded by five Afghan non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that felt the need to join forces in order to address peace, good governance and human security issues in Afghanistan during and after the 2014 transition. These are in alphabetical order: CPAU-Cooperation for Peace and Unity, EPD-EQUALITY for Peace and Democracy, PTRO-Peace Training and Research Organization, SDO-Sanayee Development Organization, and TLO-The Liaison Office.

All five organizations are well-established and known, active members of Afghan civil society, with a good track record in working on peace, research/advocacy, dialogue facilitation and conflict resolution. They pride themselves on best practises, transparency, accountability, and working in true accordance with the rules and regulations set for the NGOs by the Ministry of Economy of the Government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Their mandates are to promote peace, good governance and advocate for the rights and needs of the community, through numerous active offices across Afghanistan.

