



Afghanistan in May 2014

Elections

On the 15th, final results of Presidential elections were announced. Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani - securing 45% and 31.6% respectively - made it to the run-off. Election officials also announced that the run-off originally planned for May 28th, would be delayed to June 14th. Difficulties transporting election materials and the Taliban attack on the IEC HQ were cited as reasons. The Free & Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan, a watchdog NGO, expressed concerns that this delay violated the constitutional doctrine that runoffs must be conducted within 15 days of announcing the first round final results.

Defying expectations for an alliance, the two remaining Presidential candidates enjoyed various high level endorsements throughout the month. Abdullah welcomed support from candidates Zalmay Rassoul and Gul Agha Sherzai who had secured third and sixth positions respectively, and former intelligence chief Amrullah Saleh. For Ghani, support came from Ahmad Zia Massoud, who was Zalmay Rassoul's running mate, and ex President Sibghatullah Mojadadi, among others.

Preliminary results of the provincial elections, announced on the 20th, focused on successes for women - the top 3 candidates in both Kabul and Daikondi provinces are all women. Meanwhile the IEC's preparations for the run-off heeded complaints from the first round. On the 20th, they blacklisted 3,000 election staff from involvement in the run-off and on the 26th announced 70,000 observers would be in place, an increase from the 8,000 in the first round.

Politics

According to the Constitution, Karzai's term as the President of Afghanistan ended on 22nd. It has not triggered any differences among the political circles in Afghanistan though. He met the leading candidates and heads of judiciary and the legislature to form a commission that will arrange the swearing in ceremony of the next President.

On the 25th, President Obama laid out his plans for American troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan: 9,800 US troops in Afghanistan will be kept for much of 2015 and a tiny guard for the American embassy will remain beyond the end of 2016. Addressing some of the 32,000 American troops stationed in Afghanistan he talked about bringing America's longest war to a responsible end. On the 31st, he announced the release of Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, the final remaining captured American soldier from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Bergdahl was captured by the Taliban five years ago. In exchange for his release, the U.S. will transfer five detainees from the Guantánamo Bay prison to Qatar.

Sham Lal Bathija made history on the 8th when he was sworn in as Afghanistan's first Hindu special envoy, taking his position as Ambassador to Canada. Sikh and Hindu minorities were among the most persecuted groups during the civil war and Taliban rule.

President Hamid Karzai caused friction amongst his senior level officials when he overruled cabinet opposition to prosecute three special forces commanders praised for anti-Taliban operations during the elections. The government was united, though, in its condemnation of the US National Security Agency, following revelations on the 23rd by Wikileaks that they record 'nearly all' domestic and international Afghan phone calls.

Security

May started with 15 people killed by a suicide car bomb in Panjshir province. On the 7th, eight members of one family were killed in Herat province when their car detonated an improvised explosive device. The next day the Taliban announced their spring offensive, claiming targets would include foreign troops, government officials, judges & officials at the foreign & interior ministries.

The Taliban claimed responsibility for the kidnapping of 16 and beheading of 8 policemen in Zabul province, and by mid May had taken control of Yamgan and neighbouring districts in Badakhshan. By the 24th the ANSF claimed they had restored security to the area and provided reassurance that run-off voting would be safe.

On the 23rd four armed men attacked the Indian consulate in Herat – but only Afghan and Indian security staff were injured. Karzai's claim that Lashkar-i-Taiba, a Pakistani-based extremist group, was responsible was rebuked by their spokesman, and no other groups claimed responsibility.

On the 31st the Afghan Minister of Defence told parliamentarians that President Karzai has authorised him to launch similar rocket attacks to Pakistan. Kunar has been under attack from the Pakistani side recently and helicopters have been used for this purpose.

Humanitarian

On the 2nd, Afghanistan was hit by the worst natural disaster in a decade. 2 successive landslides in Argo district of Badakhshan buried hundreds of homes and villagers, adding to the displacement and damage caused by April's flooding. UNOCHA confirmed on the 6th that 506 people died and 1,000 families were displaced or otherwise affected. A rapid national and international response was hampered by insufficient assessment data and instances of nearby villagers rushing to receive relief supplies. In addition to the Argo landslide, heavy rain caused serious flooding with loss of life and property in 27 provinces, affecting 125,000 people.

On the 14th the Norwegian Refugee Council's *Global Overview 2014* ranked Afghanistan 11th for new displacements in 2013. 80% of these were attributed to armed conflict and associated violence.

Rights

Herat officials reported that a local man killed his pregnant wife with a shovel on the 6th. The husband fled the area and his motives are still unknown.

On the 15th, US officials released 10 Pakistani prisoners who had been held without trial in Bagram prison. It is thought some of the detainees had been held for many years.

On the 16th the Wall Street Journal reported that Afghan refugees in Iran were being recruited, with incentives including payment, residency or education, to fight with pro-Assad forces in Syria. Afghan members of parliament called for an investigation.

On the 13th, Saudi Arabian officials deported 13 Afghan underage boys (6 - 15) who had been trafficked into that country to engage in street selling and begging. They have been reunited with their families, who had apparently handed their children to the traffickers.

A caucus of 22 female members of parliament formed on the 25th, headed by Fawzia Koofi. The caucus presented 11 recommendations for the new Afghan government, including greater participation for women in decision making and at least one woman to sit on the entirely male-dominated Supreme Judicial Council.

Culture and people

An Afghan migrant made headlines in the UK on the 7th when he attempted to cross the English Channel from France on a raft made of plastic bottles, wooden crutches and a bed-sheet. He told journalists that he had waved to ferry passengers and signalled to them that his boat was better than theirs. Taken back to France by coast-guards, he has vowed to make a bigger raft.

Three young Afghans were in Sri Lanka from 6-10th to ensure Afghan youth views were heard at the World Conference on Youth. Alongside government and UN representatives they joined 1,500 delegates from 159 countries in discussions, debates and workshops.

Afghanistan's cricket team continued their success with a win over UAE in the ACC Premier League.

And the first national wheelchair basketball team travelled to Italy for their first international games. The group was formed under support and encouragement from Alberto Cairo, the award-winning prosthetics specialist who has dedicated years of service to disabled Afghans through his work with the International Committee of the Red Cross.