



Afghanistan in October 2018

Elections

The long-awaited parliamentary elections which have been delayed for three years, were finally held in Afghanistan on the 20th, 21st and the 27th. Despite security threats, about 4 million people went to vote, with a highest ever turnout of women. This marked the country's first elections entirely organised and run by Afghans. More than 2,500 candidates ran for 250 seats in the Wolesi Jirga, the lower house of parliament. Candidates, many of whom were young women and men, came from diverse professional backgrounds including journalism and civil service, and many also came from political families.

In the lead-up to the vote, at least 10 parliamentary candidates were killed and two more kidnapped by Taliban and Daesh fighters who had vowed to disrupt the process. At least 192 security incidents were reported on Election Day, most notably in Kabul where a suicide bomber targeted a voting centre killing at least 18 people and injuring 25.

Security was not the only issue which threatened the vote. Technical difficulties and the malfunctioning of biometric devices were among the core reasons for more than 13,000 complaints lodged from voters across the country. Biometric devices were reportedly not used in some polling stations and caused delays in other ones. A Presidential Decree issued only a month ago forced the IEC to use biometric verification machines in an attempt to avoid fraud and double voting. In Kandahar, elections were postponed for a week following an attack that killed Police Chief General Abdul Raziq. Ghazni is the only province that didn't have elections and this was due to political and security issues. Vote counting has started and the preliminary results are due by the 10th of November.

Peace

After three months and for the second time this year, Americans, led by Zalmay Khalilzad met Taliban political representatives on the 12th in Qatar. Khalilzad, an Afghan by birth, served as the US Ambassador to Kabul from 2003 – 2005, and is now the head of the US peace efforts in Afghanistan. As a result of the meeting, on the 29th, Pakistan released Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, one of the founders of the Taliban, and Samad Sani, a commander. Reactions about the US meeting the Taliban directly have been mixed, with President Ghani voicing his anger for not having been involved enough.

Security

General Raziq's assassination came as major victory for the Taliban, a regime that was toppled this month sixteen years ago. A reliable ally for the US, he was credited with turning Kandahar, the Taliban's birthplace, into the safest and most prosperous city in southern Afghanistan. He was also a well-known human rights abuser and labelled 'torturer-in chief' by Human Rights Watch. The 39-year old had dodged at least nine attempts on his life. On the 18th, he and other provincial leaders were attacked by one of the bodyguards of Kandahar Governor Zalmay Wesa, after a meeting with US General Austin Scott Miller. In the attack, a Kandahar spy chief was also killed and the Governor and an US General were injured. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack. Tadeen Khan, General Raziq's brother, was later appointed to replace him as Police Chief, at the request of tribal leaders.

The conflict continued in several provinces, most notably in Faryab and Nangarhar, where the insurgents attacked Afghan government, military, and civilian offices. On the 5th, Afghan and US forces carried out a 24-hour attack in 15 provinces, killing at least 57 insurgents, the Afghan Ministry of Defence claimed. The Taliban Shadow District Chief for Hesarak, Abdul Jabar, was among the victims of a drone strike in Nangarhar. In another Afghan military raid, at least 14 civilians were killed in Nangarhar. Furious residents staged a demonstration placing the bodies of the victims on a major highway, blocking traffic.

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These operations took place despite last month's UN report noting a 39% increase in civilian deaths from US and Afghan aerial attacks since 2017. A new UN report this month indicated a 21% increase in the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) by insurgents against civilians, which has caused almost half of civilian casualties since January 2018. October was marked by several IED civilian casualties most notably in Ghazni, Paktika and Kabul provinces.

Rights

On the 31st, Afghan Ministry of Education published guidelines to raise awareness about girls' health and hygiene in school, addressing the taboo of menstrual hygiene. According to Ministry of Health, menstruation causes 30% of girls to miss out on classes during their time of the month, they sometimes drop out, and 12% of them do not have access to healthcare. The guidelines follow a 2017 UN report showing that half of girls in Afghanistan do not have access to necessary information on menstruation.

The Afghan government adopted a new policy to prevent sexual harassment in the security sector. The policy fills a legal vacuum for the protection of women in the army, which according to right activists is a prevalent issue. Women currently represent 1.4% of Afghan Security Forces with the highest numbers serving in the Afghan National Police.

Humanitarian and development

The ongoing drought is causing a humanitarian crisis that has displaced an estimated 275,000 people – 52,000 more than the number displaced by conflict this year. A new analysis from the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification shows that 43.6% of the rural population is facing severe and acute food insecurity and is in need of emergency assistance, with a predicted increase to 47.1% in the next three months. The drought has depleted farmers of their assets and livelihoods and forced people to move to cities. Charities are concerned that only 33% of the UN drought response call has been funded so far.

On the 13th, the Taliban announced they have settled their dispute with the International Committee of Red Cross and will provide safe passage to their staff. This was announced after Red Cross officials met Taliban envoys for two days in Qatar, to discuss the Taliban's allegations that the charity ignored the mistreatment of Taliban prisoner by the Afghan government. The dispute began two months ago and threatened to stop the work of the Red Cross, which employs 1,000 staff in the country and has worked for 30 years to ease the plight of those caught in war.

Gold and copper mining contracts signed for two major projects in Badakhshan and Sar-e Pul drew criticism from transparency activists. The deals were signed in Washington D.C. on the 7th with Centar, a mining and investment group, and its operating company Afghan Gold and Minerals Co. The latter is led by Sadat Naderi, who until recently served as Minister in the Afghan government. Integrity Watch Afghanistan said it was a clear breach of Afghan law which bars former ministers from holding contracts for five years after leaving office. The Ministry of Mining responded that the contracts were approved in 2012, before Naderi became a Minister.

Amnesty International, a charity, asked European governments to stop the forced return of Afghan asylum seekers. A new report by Save the Children, another charity, showed that nearly three-quarters of interviewed children did not feel safe during the return process, with over half of them reporting violence and coercion. Others reported issues of physical and psychosocial harm. According to Save the Children, the returns also put children at risk of being recruited by armed groups and facing social stigma once they are back in Afghanistan.

People & Culture

On the 11th, the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan fit a deer with prosthetic leg for the first time in the organisation's history. The deer was brought in by Mashal, a 20-year-old, who had lost one of his legs in war and had been supported by the charity with a prosthetic leg himself. Mashal said he felt for the injured deer when he saw it was not able to keep up with

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the herd. Mashal, who now takes care of the deer, is a tailor by profession. He is studying and hopes to become an orthopedic technician to support other humans and animals.