

"Status Report on Afghanistan's Presidential Election"
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Radio Free Europe

Akbar Ayazi (in Kabul)
Abubakar Siddique
Moderated by: Jeffrey Gedmin

Operator: Hello and welcome to Radio Free Europe's status report on Afghanistan's presidential election.

As a reminder, all lines will be on listen-only mode, and there will be time for questions and answers at the end of the call. If you need any technical assistance during this call, please press star-zero to speak to an operator.

I will now turn the call over to today's moderator, Mr. Jeffrey Gedmin. Go ahead, please.

Lisa, thank you. And welcome to friends and colleagues in Washington and the same in Kabul. This is Jeff Gedmin. I'm President of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. It's my pleasure to invite you on to the call and moderate today.

We have two colleagues joining us from RFE/RL. We have from our Central Newsroom Senior Analyst Abubakar Siddique, and we also have our Service Director of Radio Free Afghanistan, which is locally known as Radio Azadi, Akbar Ayazi joining us from Kabul.

Akbar, as many of you may know, had the privilege of organizing and also moderating last Sunday's presidential debate between President Karzai and two of his rivals. Akbar is still in Kabul managing our coverage of the elections today from the bureau in the capital and through stringers throughout the country.

To all of you, again welcome. And Abubakar, welcome. And Akbar, welcome.

Mr. Akbar Ayazi: Thank you.

Mr. Jeffrey Gedmin: Perhaps I could call on you, Akbar, first just to give us a couple minutes of your observations from today and what you think is important to understand thus far.

Mr. Akbar Ayazi: Thank you, Jeff. And I apologize for my hoarse voice, because I've been screaming on mobile phones with my 44 reporters throughout the country all day today because the phone lines are normally not good.

We were like 12 hours live on the air, from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. in Afghanistan. I think the election went generally well. I think it was like a great success for the people of Afghanistan to the extent--because of the violence that is taking place in this country and also because of the serious threats that the Talibans had made.

The--unfortunately, the turnout was very low compared to the previous elections, and in particular as far as women are concerned. A very small number of women appeared in polling stations in Afghanistan. There was a total ban on the reports on violence and terrorist attacks, and our reports say that about eight

reporters were arrested today in Kabul, only because they were trying to get into the areas where the violence were taking place.

There were four major incidents in Kabul, the official count for the violence, because security was the major concern. Ninety thousand troops were securing--trying to secure this election. So, the top of the agenda in this election was security and security. The official counts say that--the Defense Ministry says that 135 incidents of violence took place, eight soldiers or policemen have been killed during this violence, and out of all of this 135, two of them were suicide bombs.

I think somehow the threats of Taliban helped to have a lower turnout, especially in the women. We don't have a--we don't have major reports indicating large number of violation by the--in the polling stations by candidates or by their representatives, and observers seems to be pretty satisfied.

But, there are always many irregularities. There were technical problems. The punchers where they were making holes in many polls were not working. They were not available. They were using scissors. Some people would not even put their fingers in the ink, but they were there to vote because--one of our reporters said that in Ghazni district, one of the Ghazni province districts, they allowed people to come and vote without putting their fingers in the ink because Taliban had made this threat.

An interesting anecdote that I have is that one of my reporters said that he went to talk to the common men on the streets standing there and not voting. Asked them why they're not voting, they said, "Why should I vote? I love my fingers."

You know, we have these kind of anecdotes and issues and the comments that were made by people. One anecdote would be this morning at 9:00, we went--we sent our reporter in Kabul to the Ministry of Women Affairs, which was a polling station. He reported to me, and he called me and he said, "Only the Minister of Women Affairs, two women, and a superstar singer they had brought here for polling stations are here. So, only four people. What should I do?" Well, I said, "Talk to the Minister and maybe you ought to encourage her to call on people and women to come and vote." So--and this is exactly what we did.

We had reports from the nomads. Nomads are a very large group of Pashtuns in Afghanistan, and their representatives were calling saying that there are not enough ballots for votes so people can put their names--or rather put in the boxes. They extended the polling times for--in some areas, so there are reports that in the north some polling stations were not extended.

We received--our radio received tens of e-mails, hundreds of calls. One interesting e-mail came from a lady from Mazari Sharif, said "Azadi Radio, I need your help because I was forced in the polling station by the supporters of Abdullah Abdullah to vote for them. And please put my concern and my comment on the air."

So, we had an incident today in Kabul very near our office. I sent a reporter. He came like in 15 minutes. He said there were shootings in that area, and all the foreign observers and the Afghan observers were running away, and polling officials left from there, the elections. And so, I had to leave and I'm back in the office and I need another [unintelligible] because that station was close.

In general, if I say the turnout--if our listeners, who I forgot to thank for tuning in to this briefing, are familiar with the geography of Afghanistan, from what I know and heard in talk all day with people, I think the 100 percent turnout was in central Afghanistan in Bamyan and Daykundi province, which are were most of the Shi'a and Hazara people are living, and apparently there are a lot of supporters of Karzai there. And also our indications show--some of the indication to us show that the turnout in the north generally was about 80 percent. In Kabul, I would say about 50 percent, and Helmand probably had the

lowest turnout. And in many, many polling stations, there were not even stations for women to go and vote because normally they have different areas.

So, this is a general picture I gave you, but I'll be more than happy to take questions. If there are any specifics, I can go on and go on. And right now, they have already started issuing--the local TVs and radios are issuing or giving the numbers of small polling stations that are coming out, who has what number of votes, who has what number of votes. I'll be more than happy to talk about those later, but my two minutes are probably up, Jeff.

Mr. Jeffrey Gedmin: Well, Akbar, thank you. I'd like to start, if I may, by asking a general question. You mentioned, Akbar, about threats, violence, intimidation, and why this one gentleman said he wouldn't vote. He values his fingers. Akbar, you probably know more than anybody, or have your finger on the pulse better than anybody, more effectively, on what many ordinary Afghans are thinking. Your station is the most popular in the country and every week you get hundreds of phone calls in Kabul and the headquarters, Prague, and you get bags and bags of mail.

My question is, and we understand why a lot of people didn't vote, but why did people go to vote in this election at this time? What do you think the hopes and expectations of your listeners are? I'm presuming that many of those went out to vote today. What are the kinds of things that you hear from our listeners about what motivates them to go out and participate in such an election?

Mr. Akbar Ayazi: You know, Jeff, I've been here like for almost 12 days. I have this feeling that this was kind of a really, really election. It was a campaign. The campaign compared to the last election was very strong, very competitive and sometimes even negative and sometimes even nasty.

And so, the voters were kind of involved in this campaign between the candidates, especially between Karzai and the very much frontrunners as Abdullah Abdullah, former Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani and former Planning Minister Bashardoust. They went and they were campaigning very hard. And so, there was--this competition between the voters started, because in Afghanistan right now, I don't think the campaign is on the issues. It's the individuals. It's the personalities.

So, the followers, since they saw the campaigning of the candidates are--given the hard campaign, so they kind of got motivated to go to their camps and just go and support them. And those who were really supporting the candidates, they were not intimidated very much by the Taliban's threats.

So, the low turnout is because those who were not really in the camps, who were not really enthusiastic about their own candidates, but they were--they had decided to vote for somebody. They decided not to come because of the intimidation.

Mr. Jeffrey Gedmin: Okay. Akbar, thank you.

Abubakar, hold your fire. We're going to bring you in momentarily. But, Lisa, if we can we'd like to go to questions now.

Operator: Certainly. Ladies and gentlemen, if you would like to ask a question at this time, please press zero-one on your telephone keypads. Again, to ask a question, please press zero-one on your telephone keypads at this time.

Our first question comes from Lisa Curtis from the Heritage Foundation. Lisa, your line is open.

Ms. Lisa Curtis: Yes. Thank you very much for that update. I think we've all been waiting to hear what happened, and so it's been very useful getting your firsthand views.

I wanted to ask when you think we will have an idea of the results. How long do people think this will take? You were saying that local TV stations are already posting the polling results at the individual polling stations, and so it seems to me that we could get some preliminary results pretty soon. Is that your thinking?

Mr. Jeffrey Gedmin: Akbar, to you.

Mr. Akbar Ayazi: Are you asking me? This is Akbar? Jeff?

Mr. Jeffrey Gedmin: Yes. Please go ahead, Akbar.

Mr. Akbar Ayazi: Oh, okay. I--before I come to this briefing, I called and spoke to the--one of the officials of the election commissions because I knew Lisa would ask me this question. The answer from him was is they are hoping that the results will come out in 48 hours. And they don't like the idea of local stations going to the polling stations, getting numbers from here and there and just sort of--as a matter of fact, there was a--there is a ban on the exit polling.

One of my projects besides conducting this debate between the candidates was to have an exit polling for tomorrow morning. But, apparently because the government stopped that in saying it's--we don't want to cause confusion. But, of course, the local TV are trying to do it, and the radio stations.

So, they are hoping in 48 hours all the votes will be in Kabul and in the data system, and the commission will announce the results.

Ms. Lisa Curtis: Thank you.

Mr. Jeffrey Gedmin: We're ready for the next question.

Operator: Okay. The next question comes from Fred Kagan from the American Enterprise Institute.

Mr. Fred Kagan: Hi. Thanks very much for your outstanding coverage and everything you've been doing over there, and thanks for this call.

I would love to have any details that you can offer about how the voting went in a couple of specific places. If you have any more details about Helmand, but also details about Kandahar, Farah, and Herat, I would really appreciate it.

Mr. Akbar Ayazi: Yes. Sure, I definitely have it. As a matter of fact, I called our reporter, I sent him to a few of the polling stations, and there are some results from Kandahar. I can give it to you right now. In one polling--in one district where they had few polling stations, 3,350 male appeared for voting, and 145 females. And in--I can give you the number from four of these polling stations. Hamid Karzai is 135, Abdullah 95, and Ahmadzai 50. In the second one Hamid Karzai is 518, Abdullah 50, and Ashraf Ghani 50. And the other one is 200 Karzai, 80 Abdullah, 60 Ashraf Ghani.

So, these are the kind of very preliminary sort of like numbers that are very--coming out, and this was from Kandahar. In the city of Kandahar, they say the voting was marginal, not as to in the south. In Helmand, it was the lowest probably in Lashkar Gah from what I know. And they say in some polling stations, there were hardly any women appearing in the polling.

In Herat, they say it was very good. It was a large turnout, and there were females in the polling stations. And the preliminary numbers that we have, in many Karzai is leading, but also Abdullah is--in some of

them, Abdullah is leading. So, they are pretty much close to each other in Herat. But, in these two provinces, from what I know, Karzai is leading by, I would say--I'll give you the number. I can't think of the percentage now.

Mr. Jeffrey Gedmin: Akbar, thank you. Lisa?

Operator: We have no more questions at this time.

Mr. Jeffrey Gedmin: Abubakar, we haven't heard from you yet, and you monitor carefully Afghanistan but also Pakistan. And I must confess I don't know what you're writing today and tomorrow about what's transpired, but let's get you in for a comment.

Mr. Abubakar Siddique: Thank you, Jeff. Well, I think in a country like Afghanistan, which essentially is a war zone, this election with all--despite all the glitches, despite all the threats, went fairly well. And the big question will be its legitimacy. If the turnout is too low, will everybody consider that as a legitimate election, or there will be a lot of post-election wrangling? Ashraf Ghani, one of the leading candidates, has clearly said that we don't--we can't afford another--we won't see another Zimbabwe or Kenya like situation in Afghanistan, and I hope it goes that way.

What this election also highlighted with the lack of participation in the southern and some of the southeastern Pashtun region is the Pashtun participation in this new political system after the fall of Taliban. The Pashtuns in Afghanistan have a dilemma. On the one hand, they are threatened--they are the community which is most frequently threatened and attacked by the Taliban insurgents, and then they are also on the receiving end of all those who either inside Afghanistan opposed the Taliban before 9/11, and those who came out to--who intervened militarily to defeat--to overthrow the Taliban regime and deny al-Qaeda Afghanistan's sanctuary.

So, I think this election has clearly showed us that in Afghanistan what has happened is that people were always thinking in terms of involving particular individuals, but what was lacked--what has lacked in this effort is that there was no focus on rehabilitation of these impoverished and remote regions so that they are no longer ungoverned spaces. We have seen it effectively in Helmand. Helmand, until a month ago, most of it was under the Taliban control. With the new operations, a lot of the district centers are at least now in Afghan control. So, this was one of the things.

But, also it has showed--the election also showed that in Afghanistan there is a renewed focus, and what has succeeded is an Afghan--a process of national reconciliation. We have seen that some of the ethnic polarization has kind of toned down. Candidates from all ethnicities went around on campaigning to all corners of Afghanistan which, I think, is a very positive thing.

And I must say that this election was--you can say on balance that it was, in a way, a considerable blow to the Taliban, because they were, after all, unable to stop the election from going forward. And people clearly defied their threats and went out and went to polling in very dangerous circumstances.

Mr. Jeffrey Gedmin: Abubakar, thank you very much. Akbar, anything to add to what you just heard from your colleague?

Mr. Akbar Ayazi: No, I totally agree with Abubakar as far as the blow to Taliban. The--when you see all the excitement amongst the supports of the candidates and those who really wanted to vote, you can tell that they were not concerned about it. So, the anecdote I gave you about the guy who was afraid of his fingers being cut off was--probably he was in the middle of the camps and he just had a candidate to go and vote for.

But, also there was another thing that I want to add to that is I don't think a good job was done to inform the people about the election, about the procedures and how they vote, where they vote. I would not be--I'm really not happy with the job that was done because this is a country with very little resources and sources of communication. And we interviewed one of the guy on the street in Oruzgan province. Those who know Afghanistan would know where it is north of Kandahar. And we said, "So, what's your story about the election?" He said, yeah, I know. He named the governor of the Nangarhar province, Gul Agha. He said, "I know he's in the elections and I'll vote for him," while this guy dropped from his candidacy about four months ago. So, these kind of stories when you hear, I feel like people were not really well informed.

The other confusion is don't forget this election was about the province--councils of provinces for, and that was the major elections. They were electing officials for the councils of all 34 provinces. And one guy sent us an e-mail saying, "I went to this poll, and for the five or six people council of a province, there were 270 candidates. So, it took me five to ten minutes to find my candidate in the picture," because they have--sometimes don't know the names. They all wear the same dress. The picture qualities are not good. The symbols are not good. So, these were also some of the problems that I could see in the elections today.

Mr. Jeffrey Gedmin: Akbar, thank you.

Lisa, back to you to ask if we had any additional questions.

Operator: To ask a question at this time, please press zero-one on your telephone keypads. The first question we have comes from Fred Kagan from the American Enterprise Institute.

Mr. Fred Kagan: Since I have the opportunity, I'd like to press for some more details on particular areas, if you have anything. I'm particularly interested in the question of turnout more than--more even than results and also of violence. I'm interested in the districts of Arghandab and Jar Panjwaye in Kandahar, in the Paktia/Khost area, especially in the Jadron tribal areas, in Wardak, and particularly I'm interested in the question of how the AP3 program did or did not help with security there, and also in Kunduz.

Mr. Akbar Ayazi: Well, thank you. From what I know, in the southern belt of the country, the southern part, they say that the--probably the largest turnouts, almost close to 100 percent turnout, was in Khost. But, apparently what they say, that the votes were pretty much divided by few Pashtun candidates. And also--and we have reports that in Wardak area and in Ghazni area, they had--Taliban were able to block some roads and not to allow people to vote.

To go to Kandahar, from stories that I've heard, our reporters in Arghandab, they--the turnout was pretty low, but in the city it was pretty good. Unconfirmed report that are telling me and very reliable sources told me--I can't name them here--is that even last night there was some fighting taking place in the Arghandab Valley and there was major fighting. So, these kind of incidents helped to have a low turnout.

In Kunduz, it was pretty good. It was pretty good because it was a pretty secure place. No major incidents and the turnout was good. From what I know that--and our reporters, we did some kind of like unofficial--I had assigned our reporters. We were not going to publish it, and this is not also for publishing in the pollings, is that it looks like the Uzbek votes, most of them went to Karzai. The Hazara votes, most of them went to Karzai. This is my feeling. This is what I was learning from the people. So, in Kunduz, in the northern part in that area where more Uzbeks and Hazaras are living, those votes went to Karzai. This is not from polling. It's just an extra information I had from a source.

Mr. Jeffrey Gedmin: Akbar, thank you. Fred, thank you for the question.

Abubakar, if I may ask, you suggested that this was a blow for the Taliban today. Can you speculate for us? You study, you research, you write, you analyze the Taliban in your work. What's your best guess as to how they're seeing today's events? And depending on what that assessment is, in your view, how do you think they're going to respond in the days and weeks ahead?

Mr. Abubakar Siddique: Well, Jeff, the thing is that the Taliban is now a generic name. It's in media, and mostly in the West, it's applied to diverse individuals, diverse groups who have very different motivations for doing what they are doing. People have local motivations. They have their local tribal rivalries in a lot of these--in the Pashtun region in the south and southeast and the east of the country.

There is considerable competition amongst some of the criminal cartels. And there will be like a very different reaction from among the Taliban. Hezb-e-Islami--the leader of Hezb-e-Islami, which is one of the main insurgent groups, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, has recently been quite soft. He even kind of hinted at allowing the elections and not attacking civilians. He said he is asking for a fresh process, fresh elections, and he's asking for a exit date for the international forces.

I think the most hard line Taliban group are now people associated with the Haqqani network, although the Afghan officials today were speaking--all the senior Afghan security officials, including the Intelligence Chief, the Defense Minister, and the Interior Minister, all pointed at the Quetta shura, which is the remnants of the former Taliban regime, and which is mostly composed of the southern Pashtun regions, Kandahar, Uruzgan, and Helmand. They orchestrated most of the attacks out of what is generally referred to as the Quetta shura.

But, I think the Taliban will look at this and they will gauge--one thing is very clear to the Taliban is that they are not winning hearts and minds in Afghanistan. They are probably--if you look at recent opinion surveys, they are the most hated group inside the country. And they also know that the threat of intimidation is a two-way sword. It is also working against them because they are largely seen in Afghanistan as agents of the foreigners, as agents of the Arabs, and maybe also the Pakistanis because a lot of these groups are now essentially headquartered there.

So, I think with all the talk of reconciliation there are a large number of Taliban who will be ready, but they will look at guarantees that they can believe in. What has happened in Afghanistan after 2001, there were a lot of Taliban fighters who were ready and other insurgents who were ready to reconcile with the government, but once they laid down their arms they were arrested, they were labeled as al Qaeda, and they were sent down--sent to Guantanamo. And that--this has clearly deterred others since late 2005 when this insurgency picked up again to reconcile with Kabul.

And I think if what we are hearing and what was--the reconciliation was the topmost issue, one of the top issues in the presidential debates. And people have all kinds of ideas, but what is realistically we can expect for is some kind of a reconciliation with all those elements who, in return for guarantees, will be able--will be willing to participate in the Afghan political process.

Mr. Jeffrey Gedmin: Abubakar, thank you. Akbar--.

Mr. Akbar Ayazi: --Jeff, may I--?

Mr. Jeffrey Gedmin: --Hello? Go ahead.

Mr. Akbar Ayazi: Yeah. Yeah, I agree with Abubakar on the one point that the most hated group is Taliban. But, at the same time, there is one thing missing also, and I want to add to the--to Abubakar's point is that on this side of the aisle, which is the Afghan government and the international community,

not enough development has taken place for those Taliban who want to return. They see--they don't see anything on this side to come to because for \$50.00 they're willing to fight. But, if they come to this side, they can't make that \$50.00.

So, there has to be some development. There has to be a project. There has to be, you know, a motivation for them to come to this side and join the normal community, especially in the south in the Pashtun area. The development is very slow and that probably is one of the reasons that they are not very enthusiastic to come to this side.

Mr. Abubakar Siddique: And Jeff, if my--I may add, we should also closely look at what is happening in Pakistan. In Pakistan, the military has finally gone out against the main insurgent groups which are closely associated with al Qaeda, which is the group that was--that is being headed by Baitullah Mehsud, who is probably now dead. And if Pakistani army is able to take advantage of the current disarray in the--what is essentially the movement of the Pakistani Taliban, the Afghan thought this will give one thousand reasons to the Afghan Taliban to rethink their future.

Mr. Jeffrey Gedmin: Thank you, Abubakar.

Lisa, do we have additional questions?

Operator: We do. The next question is from Paul Matulic from the US Senate staff.

Mr. Paul Matulic: Yes. Hi, Akbar and Abubakar. Thanks very much for the fantastic coverage you've done the last few weeks and actually throughout these last few years. It's been really exceptional and important and we've relied on it.

I've two questions. One is can you speculate yet based on these kind of rough estimates of results whether you expect that there'll be a runoff election? That's question one. And question two, do your sources give you any indication about what type of cabinet changes might occur in the next administration?

Mr. Jeffrey Gedmin: Akbar, would you take that one, please?

Mr. Akbar Ayazi: Yes. From what I heard the results are supposed to be announced in 48 hours. So, the nation is sitting and waiting in front of their TV stations and radios like ours, listening.

The runoff elections, I met with President Karzai, because I was doing this debate, at least three, four times. I met with Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah and Bashardoust, all of them a few times. Everybody at that time before the debate as acting like president, and they thought they are going to be the real winners. But, then when I met the--President Karzai, 10 days ago I met him when I came to Kabul. He seems like he's not very excited about it. But, then when I met him just a day before the elections, he seemed very confident of finishing it at the first round.

But, now with this low turnout, I am consequently a little concerned it might go to the second round. I am not sure. And they say it's going to be between Abdullah and President Karzai. But, from this little polling example that I gave you from Kandahar, it looks like Karzai is leading now. And so, I'm just not sure if he's going to make the 50 percent. But, that low turnout makes me a little concerned about the second round.

Mr. Jeffrey Gedmin: Very good.

Lisa, do we have another question?

Operator: To ask a question, please press zero-one. The next question comes from Richard Weitz with the Hudson Institute.

Mr. Richard Weitz: Yes. Thank you very much for doing this.

The question I had was respect to the international observers. Often, it's not--they're going to have the most influence over what the perception is about the fairness of the elections. Have we got any comments from them that you encountered either officially or through their--your encounters with them in the polling places?

Mr. Akbar Ayazi: Yes, we did talk to a couple of officials. They didn't report any irregularities. They--and from what I know, I think they are throughout the country. And the majority of them are sitting in Kabul when the entire boxes come through to Kabul and they are going to be put into the database system, and I'm pretty sure they are going to observe. But yet, I don't know about the other stations.

But, the one anecdote--I don't know when you tuned into this conversation--I gave was right about one kilometers away from our bureau here in Kabul. And I sent my reporter where the--some kind of shooting was taking place in the vicinity and the international observers, the election officials, Afghan observers, candidate observers, and the voters were all running away and they deserted the polling station. So, I don't know if that was the situation with all the 135 incidents that took place today.

But, they are very active. They are very present, and the Afghans know the international community is here. And I think, Richard, you are right is that they will be very influential in what they say in the next 48 hours.

Mr. Jeffrey Gedmin: Akbar, thank you.

Lisa, back to you.

Operator: The next question?

Mr. Jeffrey Gedmin: Yes, please.

Operator: The next question comes--sorry. The next question comes from Courtney Dunn [sp] from the House Appropriations Committee.

Ms. Courtney Dunn: Hi. Thanks very much for doing this.

I have two questions. The first is are you hearing anything regarding the process of securing, counting, and then tabulating the results, how that process is going? What precautions are put in place to prevent problems there, and any sense of sort of the quality of that process?

And then, the second question I have is regarding, you touched on this a little bit already, the various candidates, what the key distinctions are. You've mentioned that platform wise there aren't a lot of distinctions. But, to the extent there were distinctions in their platforms but then also the ethnic and geographic strongholds, what those--you know, just summarize briefly what the key differences are and whether you're seeing that playing out in the tabulations that you're initially observing. Thank you.

Mr. Jeffrey Gedmin: Great. Thank you.

Akbar, would you like to try those?

Mr. Akbar Ayazi: Yes, Jeff. I heard the first question. It was kind of clear. But, if you could help me, please, I couldn't hear the second question well. Maybe you could clarify for me.

Mr. Jeffrey Gedmin: The second question was about the differences in the candidates, their platforms, their vision, and how that's been playing out in the run up to the election and the end of the campaign.

Mr. Akbar Ayazi: Okay. Thank you, Jeff.

From what I know that the international community forces, those were here for security. The Afghan security will help in the process of the counting of the votes. As you know, in Afghanistan they all have to be transported even--transported even from mountains and far districts. And they even use donkeys and horses, and they will provide security for them.

But, of course they all have to come to Kabul. In order for them to bring them Kabul, sometimes in some parts of the country, it's going to be difficult transporting them. We will see some incidents, I'm pretty sure, where they will get attacked by Taliban, by whoever.

So, as far as the differences is concerned, as I said earlier, it's not really about platform here. It's not really. I conducted this debate and I received hundreds of e-mails of--congratulating me putting candidates, including the President, on the stage just to talk in peace, just to--not to say things, not to insult each other, not to use comments and words. I mean, Ashraf Ghani was really concerned that he just--he was--he just wasn't debating because he was afraid that it would not turn into a very national debate on agendas.

It turned out to be a very peaceful and great debate. But, I personally didn't find anything new on their platforms. They were pretty similar. They were thoughts they had said in the past. I didn't really see something. And this is what my feedback for me from informed sources was, is that they did not really give something informing on their platform. They were just like swinging back and forth on the same things that they've been saying for months and even years.

So, this is a debate about individuals. I could clearly see on the line--on the voters that they were divided very much on the ethnic line in the Pashtun, the Hazara, the Tajik. I personally think--I think Karzai did a great job on getting the Hazara, the Shi'a vote and the Uzbek vote, the Turkmen vote, that these are a good sized minorities in the country.

So, I don't find it really to be based on the platform, and I honestly don't know clear platform. The only thing I heard from President Karzai when I asked him is, "What's your plan for peace and reconciliation in stopping this violence in the next term if you're elected?" He said he's going to call a Loya Jirga, the grand assembly of the Afghan people, and let them decide how do they want to deal with the Taliban and even invite them. So, he's hopeful to use the tribal leaders in the grand assembly and put them with Taliban and see he can achieve something. These are--some of the things are new, but not really a major platform on major issues.

Mr. Abubakar Siddique: If I--.

Mr. Jeffrey Gedmin: --Akbar, thank you. Abubakar, please.

Mr. Abubakar Siddique: Yeah. If I may add to this, because I wrote a lot about these issues in the past few days. Is it--there are two candidates out there who have gathered, surprisingly, a sizeable number of following in a relatively short period of time. And they are essentially introducing a new kind of politics to Afghanistan.

These two candidates are former Planning Minister Ramazan Bashardost, who essentially is a very--an Afghan populist. He lives in a tent outside the Parliament. He distributes all his salary to the poor. And then, Ashraf Ghani, who is kind of an unlikely political figure because his background is a World Bank, international technocrat. And he was the Finance Minister in the first two Karzai administrations, which is--and probably he was the most unpopular person in the government with other people in the government.

But, we have also seen a number of new alignments emerging in Afghanistan. One of the significant developments of this campaign has been the fragmentation of what was the anti-Taliban coalition, which was generally called the Northern Alliance, because Fahim, who is essentially a successor to Mehsud, is now Karzai's running mate. And Abdullah Adbullah, who was also a very close friend of Mehsud and confidant of Mehsud, the late Northern Alliance leader, is running against him. And Mehsud's brothers are also supporting him, and so is Burhanuddin Rabbani, who is a leading Islamist, a Tajik leader and a former president. And there are other powerful mujahedeen figures who are among the Hazaras particularly, and also among the Tajiks like Ismail Khan from Herat, who are supporting Karzai.

So, this is essentially a lot of progress to Afghanistan, but what is missing is that unfortunately political parties are not taking root, so much of the politicking is still kind of deal making. It also brings me back to one--the question that Paul raised, Paul Matulic raised about the future--the shape of the future cabinet. I think that will be a million dollar question because--can you hear me?

Operator: Um-hmm.

Mr. Jeffrey Gedmin: Yes, we're good.

Mr. Abubakar Siddique: Oh, okay. Sorry.

Because Karzai has promised so much to some of these warlords, he has essentially--some of the estimates suggest that he had essentially promised 200 ministerial posts to people which don't exist. One of the--one of his major backers, the former warlord, Hazara warlord, Mohammad Mohaqiq claims that Karzai has even promised him two new provinces for the Hazara ethnic group.

So, I think--and also, if Karzai is elected, as is likely, he will be under tremendous international pressure. When he visited Washington in May, the Obama administration was--essentially had a very good briefing for him. They wanted him to answer some very tough questions about some of the alleged drug dealers in his administration, about the massive corruption in his government. But, then there was some civilian casualties in western Afghanistan in a NATO or American air raid, airstrike, and he got off kind of lightly.

So, I think governance will be the number one issue which will also compete with the whole question about reconciliation with the Taliban.

Mr. Jeffrey Gedmin: Abubakar, thank you.

Lisa, we have a distinguished group on the line today. I want to be mindful of everybody's time. May I ask you, Lisa, to see if we have one final question?

Operator: The next question comes from Luke Wagner [sp] from MDI.

Mr. Luke Wagner: Hello. I'm wondering if you could talk about what is happening and what happened after the polls closed, and if supporters went home or if there were any kind of gatherings or rallies after

the polls closed, and also what sort of violence there was after the closing of the polls. And also, if you could talk about what you expect will happen between now and when the results are released in 48 hours. Thank you.

Mr. Jeffrey Gedmin: Akbar, please?

Mr. Akbar Ayazi: Thank you, Jeff. You know, in Afghanistan, they don't put their clocks behind so--or forward. They stay with one time and it gets dark quite early, and because--except major cities, it gets dark quite quickly and there is no life after dark. So, that's why they closed polling at 5:00, but then they extended in some areas. And they were pretty much closed by 6:00, and by 6:30 you can see the dark is coming and normally people just go to their homes and the streets get deserted. So, this was exactly the situation here today. And right after the polls were closed, no demonstrations, no gatherings, and everybody went to their homes because it quickly got dark and Kabul got deserted.

So, with the next 48 hours, what will happen? I don't see anything major happening because they will not announce any results officially except these little predictions that are taking place in local TVs. And I don't think people pay a lot of attention to it. But--so, I'm not predicting really anything.

And the other thing is tomorrow--maybe tomorrow or maybe--most probably tomorrow is going to be the first day of Ramadan, and that would help calm down things because that's a holy month. People go to prayers and things like that. So, hopefully tomorrow or Saturday will be Ramadan and the results will be coming out and it'll be kind of quiet, I would think.

Mr. Jeffrey Gedmin: Akbar, thank you. And what I would like to suggest, then, is Lisa, that will be our final question today.

I'd like to thank all the friends and colleagues in Washington. Abubakar, our senior analyst from the Central Newsroom here in Prague, where I am at RFE/RL headquarters. And Akbar, safe travel back, but meanwhile, thank you for all the good work you're doing and all the colleagues in Kabul and throughout the country.

And ladies and gentlemen, with that, we'll conclude.