

# EDITORIAL: A glimmer of hope rises from Afghan election

BY THE FRESNO BEE EDITORIAL BOARD

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An Afghan elections worker notes the serial numbers of ballot boxes at a warehouse Independent Elections Commission in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Afghans voted in droves Saturday for a new president in an election remarkably free of violence or widespread cheating — the most encouraging sign in a long time that America's investment of blood and treasure will lead to a semblance of democracy.

For a country at war for 13 long years, this is a major achievement, and a telling defeat for the Taliban.

To try to disrupt the election, the Taliban staged a series of high-profile attacks in recent weeks and loudly vowed to kill Afghans who tried to vote at the nation's 20,000 polling stations in 34 provinces.

But with 195,000 Afghan soldiers and police guarding the polling places, about 7 million ballots were cast — far more than in the prior two presidential elections. And there were nowhere near the number of reports of fraud and intimidation that marred the re-election of President Hamid Karzai in 2009.

Karzai was constitutionally barred from running for a third term.

Importantly for U.S. interests, it's difficult to imagine that any of the three front-runners would be worse than Karzai, who has written a new definition of unreliable partner. Despite billions in aid, he bailed from a crucial security agreement that would allow a small U.S. force to stay past this year to train Afghan troops and mount counterterrorism operations. That is essential to preserving hard-fought gains.

All three contenders have pledged to sign the pact. When the final results are announced in mid-May, it's likely that two will proceed to a runoff election no earlier than May 28. Ideally, the one who prevails would have the fewest ties and loyalties to Karzai, who will try to retain his corrupting influence.

Afghanistan remains dangerous. The day before the vote, there was a disturbing first — the first known attack by Afghan security personnel on foreign journalists. Associated Press photographer Anja Niedringhaus was killed and AP correspondent Kathy Gannon was wounded when a police commander opened fire on their car, traveling with election workers delivering ballots to the eastern city of Khost. Afghanistan is in the top 12 of the most dangerous countries for the media, with 26 deaths since 1992, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Far too many allied troops, Afghan civilians and journalists have been killed in the last 13 years. While those losses never can be recovered, a successful and peaceful transfer of power would be some reward for that heavy price.

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