

Breaking Afghanistan's Election Crisis Cycle

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Electoral integrity is an essential element for ending Afghanistan's culture of impunity and promoting legitimate governance. Over the last decade, elections in Afghanistan have been marred by corruption that has undermined the government's legitimacy and effectiveness. Against this bleak backdrop, Ahmad Yusuf Nuristani, controversial head of the Independent Election Commission (IEC), [stepped down](#) on March 26, providing hope for cleaner governance. Yet, the deeper structural challenges that produced the electoral crises of 2009, 2010, and 2014, remain. With parliamentary and district council elections slated for October 15 of this year, Afghanistan's political leadership must fix a clearly broken election process.

Installed at former President Hamid Karzai's behest in 2013, Nuristani had overseen the deeply flawed [presidential election](#) in 2014. He also led the charge to systematically [dismantle](#) rudimentary integrity mechanisms which had uncovered serious irregularities during the 2009 presidential election. That facilitated even greater political interference in the 2014 presidential

polls. This situation was only resolved through extra-constitutional means. In the end, the process was so broken and the results so flawed that an agreement was brokered by the United States to break the deadlock whereby Ghani was declared the winner of the presidency, but no final vote count was ever released. Abdullah Abdullah was named Chief Executive Officer, a post that did not previously exist and lacked a clear mandate. Part of the [agreement](#) to secure Abdullah's acquiescence in a unity government was a promise to overhaul the electoral system.

Yet, the road to electoral reform has been rocky. After extensive delay, the Special Electoral Reform Commission (SERC) commenced in June 2015; only to be quickly consumed by internal disagreements. A majority [endorsed](#) some reforms later that year most notably establishing a Selection Committee to determine membership to the IEC and the Independent Election Complaints Commission (IECC). More important, it proposed a new electoral system. Afghanistan parliamentary elections had used a single, non-transferable vote (SNTV) system since 2005. Under SNTV, parliamentary districts have multiple seats and the top vote recipients in each district receive seats. Each province has their total number of representatives allocated by population, with a total of 249 seats nationwide. The results tend to be chaotic, complex and ultimately not representative. Ballots are unwieldy and small vote differentials can produce widely varying results. Moreover, this system discourages political party development by rewarding individual notoriety and hindering collective action. That in turn leaves parties weak in the sense that they cannot aggregate social interests or offer coherent platforms. The SERC [majority advocated](#) for a system that allocated one-third of the seats through proportional representation with single voters' districts, coupled with a quota system, but it was not clear whether this would simplify or, more likely, further complicate the procedures.

These plans were abruptly quashed last December when parliament's lower house (Wolesi Jirga) rejected the reforms. In response, Ghani issued a new presidential decree law on March 5. While the SERC's reforms had been criticized as insufficient, the new reforms were even more modest. They focused on relatively minor technical adjustments to the IECC and IEC and they fall far short of major structural changes needed to get Afghanistan's deeply flawed democratic processes back on track.

Without doubt, Nuristani embodied what was wrong with the Afghan election process. It is essential that the new head of the IEC is someone whom all ethnic and political constituencies respect as fair and impartial. But a new IEC chair will not be sufficient. Meaningful election reform, overseen by a truly independent IEC and backed by a vigorous, impartial IECC remains vital. Ideally, these procedural changes would be coupled with an electoral system that more faithfully translates popular preferences into electoral results. The use of closed-list proportional representation, for instance, could bolster the viability of political parties substantially, and more accurately reflect voter preferences.

International actors can also play a constructive role. They should stand firm in demanding serious reform before underwriting the expenses of another parliamentary poll. The first [formal step](#) towards democracy in Afghanistan actually started with the registration of voters for elections in mid-2004 by the United Nations. In this context, an interim Joint Electoral Management Body was created, with both Afghan and international members, that was later replaced by the IEC. The presence of international membership on the IEC and IECC should help prevent abuses and address claims of electoral malfeasance swiftly, fairly, and effectively.

Afghanistan continues to face daunting political and economic issues, as well as a growing Taliban insurgency which openly challenges the state's authority. A sensible electoral system, combined with a well-constructed law on political parties, and well-executed credible elections could help jumpstart Afghanistan's flagging democracy and produce legitimate political leadership to start addressing those challenges.