

Testimony of Ambassador David D. Pearce
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Introduction

Thank you, Senator Casey, for the invitation to appear before the Subcommittee. Ambassador Dobbins was just sworn in as Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan on May 10 and asked me to convey to the members of the subcommittee that he looks forward to working with you.

On behalf of both Secretary Kerry and Ambassador Dobbins, let me just say the Department of State appreciates the helpful role that the Subcommittee has played in focusing attention on a host of important issues in South and Central Asia, and particularly your focus on Afghanistan. Your travel to the region and your continuing conversations with Afghan officials signal Congressional attention to all of these issues.

Today, as requested, I will focus on the elections, and I can tell you Secretary Kerry has no higher priority. They are at the very center of all that we are trying to achieve. In our Strategic Partnership Agreement, Afghanistan reaffirmed its commitment to democratic governance and free, fair, and transparent elections. The 2014 presidential election, now less than a year away, will be a milestone in Afghanistan's democratic development.

The elections will be an opportunity for Afghan men and women to choose what kind of country they want to live in, what kind of leaders they want to empower, and, ultimately, how they will resolve the conflict that has divided their country for so many years. The presidential election, together with the 2014 provincial council elections, will cement the gains of Afghan society and set the trajectory for Afghanistan's stability long into the future. So the stakes are high.

The elections are not happening in a void. Today, Afghans are defending their country against the insurgents, and our troops are starting the long journey home. This transition is extremely challenging – and it is critical we get it, along with the election and our long-term partnership, right. That is why we signed the Strategic Partnership Agreement with Afghanistan, and it is why we have placed such great emphasis on the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework. Both link the success of the elections to our long-term partnership and to the continued support of the international community.

For pessimists out there, I'd like to point out that Pakistan just came through an election campaign with violence, fraud allegations and other enormous challenges, but few doubt that the results represent the voice of the Pakistani people. While the parallels are not precise, Afghans nevertheless can take heart in this democratic transition and understand that they control the direction of their future.

The United States firmly believes that the future stability of Afghanistan rests on a peaceful transition of political authority from President Karzai to his successor in 2014 following a democratic, inclusive and credible election. For more than a decade, President Karzai has led the country through some very transformative and difficult times, but the biggest piece is yet to come: handing over power next year. Today's hearing takes place exactly one year before the last day of President Karzai's term of office. He has stated repeatedly that he will honor the Constitution and step down, and nothing will cement his legacy more as an Afghan patriot and democratic leader. For our part, we will do all we can to help ensure that a year from today, Afghanistan experiences the first peaceful and constitutional transfer of power in its history.

Success requires that the election results be acceptable to a broad majority of Afghans – including those who voted for losing candidates – so that Afghan citizens throughout the country accept the winner as the legitimate president. Such a handover of power will send a strong signal to all – including the Taliban – about the resilience of Afghanistan's democratic institutions and the paramount importance of the Constitution and rule of law.

After years of service in the Senate and frequent trips to Afghanistan, no one understands better than Secretary Kerry the stakes involved. As he said here in his testimony in January, if we don't succeed in helping Afghans administer an acceptable election, it will be very difficult to convince the American people and our allies to stay engaged in this effort.

Afghan preparations for the elections

I would like to report to you on what the Afghans are doing themselves to make Secretary Kerry's words a reality. The Afghan government, election officials, opposition leaders and civil society understand that having a sound democratic framework for the elections in place well in advance of election day is critical to Afghan stability, as well as to sustaining international commitments to

Afghanistan. With encouragement from the international community, the Independent Election Commission (IEC) has outlined a timeline for the elections, designed a public relations campaign to educate voters about the process, and developed a comprehensive operational plan to combat fraud and increase participation, including of women. The IEC is also undertaking efforts to conduct voter registration to ensure that all who are eligible to vote will have the opportunity to do so.

Security preparations are well under way. The Afghan security ministries, in consultation with ISAF, are engaged in active planning, including for access of women to polling stations. The IEC has produced a list of polling stations, which the security ministries are reviewing. Afghan forces will take the lead for security on election day as in the past, but we will still have forces on the ground to provide appropriate support.

These are all positive developments. And though the planning process can be slow, it is achieving results. This is not to say there are not serious challenges. The necessary legislation to establish a sound electoral framework has not yet been finalized, and time is running short as candidates prepare to form their tickets and register in September. President Karzai and the Parliament are working on these issues. One of the key tasks is standing up a truly independent electoral complaints body to adjudicate electoral disputes and a credible appointment of a new IEC chairperson. While Afghans must decide precisely what these mechanisms should look like, and who belongs in these positions, the process must be credible. We believe an electoral framework based on law, founded on broad and inclusive consultations, is the best way to achieve that.

Additionally, it is important that the Supreme Court justices whose constitutional terms have expired, be removed and replaced. This will help legitimize the Court's decisions and solidify confidence in the process. This is critical as the Supreme Court may rule, as in the past, on fundamental constitutional matters related to the elections.

And apropos of security, let's not forget that Afghans are faced with holding an election amid an ongoing insurgency in a country in which institutions are still developing. We expect the Taliban to try to disrupt the process both in the lead-up to and on election day as they have in the past. We have to be realistic and acknowledge that this will be a challenge to the process.

Support from the United States and the International Community

What are we doing to keep this process on track? First, let me tell you what we will not do. The United States will not take sides or endorse any candidate in these elections, as ultimately this election belongs to the Afghans. A fair and inclusive electoral process and a unifying, widely-accepted outcome are key to achieving our goal of strengthening Afghan democracy.

We have identified three near-term priorities that we believe will lay a solid foundation for credible elections. First, as I mentioned, this includes Parliament passing legislation that to establish a truly independent body to adjudicate complaints. Second, the IEC must be led by a credible and competent commissioner. And third, the IEC needs to finalize and begin to implement its operational plan. Our colleagues at U.S. Embassy Kabul are engaging intensively with Afghans across the board to achieve these goals. This includes election officials, security ministries, parliament, opposition, political parties, civil society, and women's organizations in support of Afghan aspirations for elections that are as free, fair and transparent as they can possibly be.

And while the United States will not support any particular candidate, we believe that Afghans will want their next president to be someone who can work in close partnership with the international community to achieve our mutual interests. And so we are speaking with political leaders on the importance of our bilateral partnership and the need for our important work to continue with Afghanistan's next president. This includes important issues like our security relationship, Afghan commitments on the Tokyo framework, support for an Afghan peace process, and preserving the gains of the last ten years, including protections for women and minorities. We also emphasize that all parties should stay engaged in the election preparations to ensure a good process and avoid a disputed outcome.

We see signs that Afghans are now working to identify candidates well in advance of the elections. Key political leaders from major parties and groupings have been engaging with each other about who should run and on what platforms. Civil society and women's groups are actively engaged with government, political leaders, and the international community. We applaud efforts to put aside old animosities and forge consensus, engage in genuine national dialogue, and place the good of the nation ahead of factional or personal interests. That's what democracy, at its best, is all about.

Of course, we need to remain realistic and recognize that these elections will not be perfect – there will be irregularities and security will be such in parts of the country that people may not be able to vote. This is why we have been providing significant financial and program assistance to help our Afghan partners build credible and independent electoral institutions. We coordinate closely with the UN and other donors on training, public information campaigns, fraud mitigation, domestic observation efforts, and improved ways to identify eligible voters.

We are committed to supporting IEC plans to combat fraud by better controlling ballots and training and vetting its staff. We view transparency is key to reducing fraud, and therefore we are also encouraging a strong program of domestic monitoring of elections.

On security, we are strengthening the capacity of the ANSF to secure the elections with ISAF support. As part of this we are focusing particular efforts on ensuring women have greater access to polling centers than in prior election cycles by supporting the IEC's gender strategy and recruitment of qualified female election staff, promoting public outreach to women, and ensuring that female searchers are available to secure polling locations.

Most importantly, we regularly discuss with our Afghan partners the nature of our enduring partnership. Afghan political players and members of civil society understand that a peaceful political transition following an inclusive and unifying electoral process is critical not just for Afghan stability but also to sustaining international commitments to Afghanistan made last year in Chicago and Tokyo.

Conclusion

National dialogue among all Afghans through political processes is critical to ending the decades of conflict. This will take time. But successful elections can promote this dialogue and provide a real spark to a peace process, as they will send a strong signal that Afghanistan's democratic institutions enshrined in its 2004 Constitution are an enduring reality. Pluralism and tolerance are bedrock principles of democracy. These elections offer an opportunity to bring many Afghans into the political process who have previously stayed on the margins.

As Secretary Kerry said in Kabul in February, the elections should represent a unifying moment for Afghanistan. We see the success of the elections as critical to our own mission and as giving the Afghans the best chance they have at healing

the wounds of the past decade and beginning the process of putting the conflict behind them.

Mr. Chairman, we look forward to continuing to work with you, your office, and this Committee on these important issues in the months ahead. And I look forward to taking your questions today. Thank you.