

Afghan leader agrees to a runoff vote

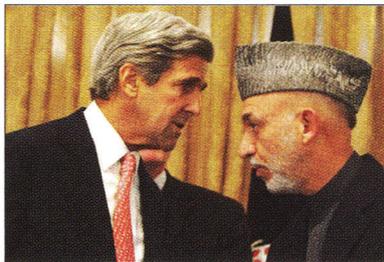
What happened

Afghanistan moved into uncertain and treacherous political terrain this week, when President Hamid Karzai, bowing to the findings of widespread fraud in August's election, agreed to a runoff vote on Nov. 7. His decision follows a ruling by a United Nations-backed commission that stripped Karzai of roughly 1 million votes, reducing his margin to 49.7 percent and triggering the runoff. Karzai in recent days was subjected to intense lobbying by Western leaders, including phone calls from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and 20 hours of talks in Kabul with Sen. John Kerry, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. While agreeing to a runoff against second-place rival Abdullah Abdullah, Karzai refused to acknowledge responsibility for any fraudulent votes. "Why their votes were disrespected should be thoroughly investigated," Karzai said.

The new vote is scheduled at a delicate time for President Obama, who is set to decide within weeks on a new military strategy for Afghanistan—including a request from Gen. Stanley McChrystal for tens of thousands of additional troops. The Obama administration is hoping for a quick resolution of the electoral turmoil, but that's far from certain. The Taliban has vowed to disrupt voting, treacherous winter snows are likely, and there is no guarantee the next election will be more credible—or more quickly resolved—than the last one. U.S., NATO, and U.N. officials all pledged their support. "This is a reflection of a commitment to the rule of law," Obama said, "and the insistence that the Afghan people's will should be done."

What the editorials said

A runoff is "a high-risk strategy and a huge logistical challenge," said the *Financial Times*. It could "further solidify" the nation's ethnic polarization—with Karzai commanding Pashtun support and his opponent Abdullah winning the Tajiks—and it will prolong the current political stalemate, which the Taliban is exploiting. Nevertheless, if the next election is "more legitimate, it will be a step in the right direction."



Kerry and Karzai in Kabul

Or a step deeper into quagmire, said *The New York Times*. If Karzai wins—and "odds are he will—that won't turn him into the credible leader that the Afghan people deserve and the credible partner that the United States needs" against the Taliban. Karzai's regime is steeped in corruption, incompetence, and drug dealing, while his opponent Abdullah is "untested." The lack of good options shows that the U.S. must focus as much on political strategy in Afghanistan as military strategy.

What the columnists said

Karzai backed down, said Jean MacKenzie in *ForeignPolicy.com*, but he got something valuable in return: the "unquestioned and open support of the international community." At his announcement, Karzai was "flanked by three ambassadors, one U.S. senator, and the U.N. special representative." Kerry publicly applauded Karzai's "statesmanship" and Obama sent a letter "commending" him. One international observer called the display a "political love-in," boosting Karzai's international standing.

Ironically, all that international support only further undermines Karzai at home, said Rajan Menon in the *Los Angeles Times*. Karzai obviously was "arm-twisted" into embracing the runoff, and the sight of Kerry looming over him at the podium "simply helps the Taliban's PR campaign." In the likely event the runoff is "tainted," the Afghan people's contempt for Karzai's government will only grow, and divisions among the "political class will become even deeper."

Divisions are growing in the U.S., as well, said Dan Balz and Jon Cohen in *The Washington Post*. A new poll shows the nation split down the middle on whether Obama should send 40,000 more troops to Afghanistan, while a majority says Obama "lacks a clear plan" for the war. Americans are suffering "sticker shock" from Gen. McChrystal's request for more troops, said Stephen Biddle in *The New Republic*. That may tempt Obama to seek "a middle way" between withdrawal and escalation. Such an approach would appeal to the public's centrism, but if the goal is to roll back the Taliban and defeat al Qaeda, it's unlikely to succeed. "In counterinsurgency, less is not more."

It wasn't all bad

■ Boston is paying local artists to paint gray electrical boxes around the city with bright, eye-catching designs. Officials hope that the initiative will keep graffiti scrawlers from tagging the boxes, out of respect for their fellow artists' work. Under the program, artists must submit a design and, if approved, they receive \$300. One painter, Christos Hamawi, got the idea for his motif of green and yellow grasses and wildflowers from weeds that were growing nearby in Copley Square. "The big thing for me," he said, "is to be able to paint in the presence of others and share that process."

■ In Mexico, taxi drivers are known to often rudely flirt with and leer at their female passengers. So the city of Puebla has come up with a novel solution: a fleet of 35 compact four-door cabs, painted bright pink and driven by women who don't stop for men. The program is privately financed with about \$440,000, with the Puebla government providing licensing and training. Each taxi is also equipped with a GPS system, alarm button, and beauty kit. Some feminists are protesting, but supporters say the cabs are providing a valuable service to women. "In the Pink Taxi," said driver Aida Santos, "they won't have that feeling of insecurity, and they feel more relaxed."



For ladies only

■ Back in 1959, the parents of California high school sweethearts Diane Harris and Rodney Day wanted to end the couple's romance. So while both were recuperating from injuries suffered in an auto accident, Harris' mother lied to them and said each had broken up with the other. But after Day's wife of 43 years died in 2007, he looked up Harris on the Internet. Harris, who was divorced, responded. On July 4 they were engaged, and this weekend, they married in Napa Valley. "I'm in seventh heaven," said Harris. "Oh my God, yes!"