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August 20, 2009 Afghan Elections: A Triumph of Democracy

Violence and intimidation fail to stop the polls in Afghanistan—the Asian Network for Free and Fair Elections (NFREL) declares; “Afghan elections take place in a reasonably well-organised manner, amid widespread violence and intimidation”—EU Election Observer Mission reports; “Afghans pursue democracy despite violence”—NDI Observer Mission concludes; “candidates and campaigns, the Independent Election Commission (IEC), state security institutions, media, and many civil society organisations played key roles in shaping the environment in which many people could exercise their political rights”—FEFA – umbrella organi-

-sation of domestic election observers proclaims! One after the other, both domestic and international election observers declared Afghanistan 2009 presidential and provincial council elections a significant achievement based on their preliminary findings—despite incidents of electoral malpractice. The August 20 Presidential and Provincial Council elections were always destined to be historic because they would be the first ever elections in Afghanistan organized and



Mock elections exercises demonstrated to voters how to correctly cast their votes on Election Day [Photo by Eckart Rohde]

executed by the Afghan Independent Election Commission (IEC) with UNDP in collaboration with UNAMA only helping to coordinate international electoral support in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 1806 (2008).

Working within a climate of fear of kidnapping and targeted killings imposed on its staff by insurgents, IEC courageously delivered the landmark elections within appropriate timelines. More than 140,000 polling staff, of which 36% were women, serviced 26,983 polling stations around the country (11,029 and 1756 polling stations being exclusively for women and nomadic Kuchi voters respectively). For the first time in the history of Afghan democracy, there was a provision for special needs voting—allowing hospitalized citizens, army personnel and prisoners to cast their votes.

But perhaps the greatest demonstration of courage was exhibited by millions of Afghan men and women from all over the country who amidst tremendous personal risks to their lives, turned up to express their democratic will and chart the future of their country through the ballot.

The camaraderie between Afghan National Security Forces and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF); the professionalism of IEC staff; the firm commitment of UN and the International community towards democracy and good governance in Afghanistan; the courage of the Afghan people and their hope for a better future – all contributed to a historic electoral achievement. There is no doubt that August 20 2009 will be remembered in the history of Afghanistan as the day that democracy triumphed over terrorism.

MoWA Leads Civic Education for Afghan Women

In August 2009 the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA), with support from UNDP and in coordination with the Independent Election Commission, held civic education trainings for 370 women across nine Kabul districts. The trainees ranged from women heads of *shuras* to illiterate homemakers who were learning for the first time about the electoral process and women's rights and responsibilities as voters and citizens. Trainers walked participants through the electoral process, taught them how to cast

their votes on Election Day, and outlined their rights in the process: for instance, making it clear that proxy voting is illegal and each woman should cast her own vote; and encouraging women not to be influenced by their district leaders or elders, but to vote for the candidates they themselves prefer.

Shaimaa Samed, one of the participants in the training, stressed that trainings and workshops like this are vital for women, especially in rural areas. Having knowledge of their civic rights, she said, enables women to participate in the political and social life of their country. Addressing the 90 trainers who came to Kabul for the 12 August closing



© MoWA: Participants in the civic education training study the candidate list for the 20 August elections

ceremony, Minister of Women's Affairs H.E. Husun Banu Ghazanfar underlined one of the training's key messages: "Your vote will affect your future, your family, your children, so you should be careful, and remember that no one can force you to vote for the candidate they want. *You* have the right to choose whom you vote for."

Her message was echoed by Minister of Hajj and Religious Affairs H.E. Muhammad Sidiq Chakari, who urged the women to "exercise your right to vote, don't allow the men in your family to cast your vote for you." Stressing that "God created women and men equal," Minister Chakari also exhorted the men in the audience to "allow the women in your families to cast their own votes."

Such trainings will continue to be necessary to support and increase women's participation in future elections, whether as candidates and voters or as the polling officers who make it possible for women to cast their votes.

SEAL conducts Workshops on Bill Drafting and Parliamentary research for the staff of the National Assembly



Photo: Bill Drafting Workshop

A workshop on Bill Drafting was conducted by the Technical Advisor in SEAL project for the Committee staff of Wolesi Jirga in the committee room of the National Assembly on 6 August 2009. It was attended by 36 members of the staff out of which three were women. The workshop covered briefly the pre-drafting steps of legislative research, touched upon issue research and legal research, legislative intent, the essential parts of a Bill and then helped in generating a dummy resolution and a dummy bill for the benefit of the participants.

It also encouraged the participants to begin using a checklist for bill drafting for facilitating the whole exercise.

Another workshop was conducted for the research staff of the secretariat on 12 August 2009. Fourteen members including two women of the research department participated in the training. Here, the focus was research work, the manner of supporting the Members of the Wolesi Jirga in their legislative tasks in addition to the fundamentals of legislative drafting.

The Public Legal Awareness Unit of the Justice and Human Rights Project organised three-day training from 6-8 July for the Public Legal Awareness staff of the Legal Department of the Ministry of Justice. The training aimed at furthering the capacity and performance of the concerned staff of the Ministry. The training was mainly focused on Human Rights, international conventions on Human Rights and state's responsibility regarding their implementation, women's human rights from Islam perspective, children's rights, and conflict resolution. In addition different legal institutions such as police, and Attorney-General Office, and Department of the Ministry of



Participants in the training session



Trainees receive Certificate of Participation

Justice, along with their duties and responsibilities were briefly described. The training material was prepared in close consultation with the concerned department of the Ministry of Justice and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission. The Commission's trainers explained Human Rights-related topics eloquently. Different working groups of participants concentrated on different issues and shared their findings with the audience. Mr. Barna – the head of the Legal Department of the Ministry of Justice – elucidated the effectiveness of the

learning event. The participants also assessed the training as productive and called for more trainings on the subject matter. At the end of the gathering, the participants were awarded with certificates of completion.

SEAL develops a Legislative Tracking Software for Afghan National Assembly

The SEAL project after a needs assessment of the legislative departments of both the Houses of the National Assembly decided on an electronic Legislative Tracking System for better tracking of bills and generating a searchable database for legislative matters. After following the procurement process a local software company was identified. Meetings were held and they were briefed on the expectations from the proposed software by the project. The company prepared the legislative tracking software as per specifications and made a presentation to the Heads of Legislative of both Houses and other staff dealing with ICT and related issue in the conference room of National



Presentation on Legislative Tracking Software 13 August 2009

Assembly on 13 August 2009. The final package is Local Area Networking (LAN) based and can be web-enabled. It will ensure the generation of a database for Bills coming from the executive, private members' legislations, if any, resolutions and Agenda of both Houses of the National Assembly. It will enable Bill tracking in the House and in the Commissions and provides for a search based on Number, Title, Ministry and Commission on the database.

The software package was well-received and several clarifications were asked regarding the software. Finally, after going through all the features of the software the head of legislative department, Mr. Khudai Nazar Nusrat agreed with the software company to have a training programme conducted for the staff in the first week of September for familiarizing them to use the package before putting it to actual use in the National Assembly.