

# TheNational

## Afghan front-runners claim victory

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Nek Mohammed claimed he was 18, the legal voting age, but police did not believe him and refused to let him into the polling station. [Jared Ferrie for The National](#)

MAZAR-E-SHARIF // Complaints of ballot stuffing and a low voter turnout marred Afghanistan's presidential election, while both front-runners claimed victory even as votes were still being counted.

"Initial results show that the president has gotten a majority," Deen Mohammad, Hamid Karzai's campaign chief, told Reuters yesterday.

"We will not go into a second round. We have a majority."

Members of the campaign team for Abdullah Abdullah were quick to deny the claim. Fazl Sangcharaki, a spokesman for the campaign, asserted that results gave Mr Abdullah 63 per cent of the vote.

Officials from the Independent Election Commission asked both campaigns to wait until preliminary results were released, possibly as early as next week, saying that such premature claims would only serve to undermine the mandate of the winner.

There are also concerns that such a public argument could lead to street battles between the candidates' supporters.

Observers had speculated that allies of Mr Karzai would engage in fraud to achieve the more than 50 per cent needed to avoid a runoff vote in October. He was facing a low turnout in the south, where he draws much support, because of threats of violence from the Taliban.

At least some of their concerns appeared to be justified, according to the Free and Fair Elections Foundation of Afghanistan (Fefa), a local observer group.

"Several anticipated patterns of fraud appear to have manifested in varying degrees," it said in a statement yesterday.

During the registration process, media reported on people buying and selling voting cards, and of people obtaining cards despite being below the legal voting age of 18. Fefa also documented officials issuing fake cards.

“We’ve seen patterns of multiple registration, of multiple cards being distributed,” said Nader Nadery, the organisation’s chairperson. “There is a danger of multiple voting, but the elections commission was remedying that by using indelible ink.”

But Fefa’s statement noted: “Reports of improper interference by local IEC staff with the voting process were received throughout the day from many parts of the country.”

Corruption among election officials combined with extra voting cards raises the spectre of massive ballot stuffing. While the IEC claims to have registered 17 million voters, the often-cited figure seems dubious in the face of Afghanistan’s population and demographics.

Of Afghanistan’s estimated 33 million people, 45 per cent are below the age of 15. That accounts for about 15 million people who are too young to vote. If the figure of 17 million voters is correct, it would mean that there are only one million Afghans between the age of 15 and 17, an unlikely possibility.

More probable is that the age group accounts for about 2.7 million people (based on the calculation that there are about 900,000 Afghans for each year aged 0 to 14). That leaves about 15.3 million voters – if all are registered – almost two million short of the figure of 17 million.

But the International Republican Institute, a US organisation that monitored Thursday’s polls, called it “credible”. “No one can dispute that the merchants of insecurity had some success,” Richard Williamson, who headed the delegation, told reporters yesterday.

Despite some irregularities, “so far it has been a credible election.” Aside from possibly rigging the results, an inflated number of voters would also sidestep concerns about an extremely low voter turnout, which could lead Afghans to deem the election results illegitimate.

Media and observer team reports indicate that the turnout in much of the south was dismal, as little as 10 per cent in some districts.

“The Taliban said, ‘Don’t vote.’ And we asked people to come out and vote despite the threats, and they didn’t,” said Norine MacDonald, head of the International Council on Security and Development, an international think tank with a field office in Helmand province. She said her researchers there, in the heart of the Taliban insurgency, found few voters out on polling day. Turnout was particularly low among women.

“I don’t think they didn’t vote because they don’t believe in democracy; it was just a security decision,” she said.

Among other election day attacks, the Taliban rocketed Helmand’s capital, Lashkar Gah, and hung two people with ink-stained fingers from trees in neighbouring Kandahar, carrying through on threats of violence against those who participated in elections.

Even the relatively stable northern provinces did not escape the violence.

On Thursday night, insurgents ambushed a lorry just outside of Mazar-e-Sharif, the capital of Balkh, which was carrying ballot papers that had been counted. An election official was killed and the ballot boxes burnt.

The elections commission announced yesterday that 11 of its workers had been killed organising the vote.

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\* With additional reporting by the Associated Press

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