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Why Afghans Have No Hope in This Week's Vote

by Malalai Joya

Like millions of Afghans, I have no hope in the results of this week's election. In a country ruled by warlords, occupation forces, Taliban insurgency, drug money and guns, no one can expect a legitimate or fair vote.

Among the people on the street, a common sentiment is, 'Everything has already been decided by the U.S. and NATO, and the real winner has already been picked by the White House and Pentagon.' Although there are a total of 41 candidates running for president, the vast majority of them are well known faces responsible for the current disastrous situation in Afghanistan.

Hamid Karzai has cemented alliances with brutal warlords and fundamentalists in order to maintain his position. Although our Constitution forbids war criminals from running for office, he has named two notorious militia commanders as his vice-presidential running mates – Qasim Fahim, who was, at the time of the 2001 invasion, the warlord who headed up the Northern Alliance, and Karim Khalili. The election commission did not reject them or a number of others accused of many crimes, and so the list of candidates also includes former Russian puppets and a former Taliban commander.

Karzai has also continued to absolutely betray the women of Afghanistan. Even after massive international outcry and brave protesters taking to the streets of Kabul, Karzai has implemented the infamous law targeting Shia women. He had initially promised to review the most egregious clauses, but in the end it was passed with few amendments, leaving the barbaric anti-women statements untouched. As Human Rights Watch recently said, "Karzai has made an unthinkable deal to sell Afghan women out in return for the support of fundamentalists in the August 20 election."

Deals have been made with countless fundamentalists in Karzai's maneuvering to stay in power. For example, pro-Iranian extremist Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq, who has been accused of war crimes, has been promised five cabinet positions for his party, and so he has told the media he's backing Karzai. A deal has even been done with the dreaded warlord Rashid Dostum – who has returned from exile in Turkey to campaign for Karzai – and many other such terrorists. Rather than democracy, what we have in Afghanistan today are back room deals amongst discredited warlords.

The two main contenders to Karzai's continued rule, Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai and Abdullah Abdullah, do not offer any change; both are former cabinet ministers in this discredited regime and neither has a real, broad footing amongst the people. Abdullah has run a high profile campaign, in part due to the backing and financial support he receives from Iran's fundamentalist regime. Abdullah and some of the Northern Alliance commanders supporting him have threatened unrest if he loses the vote, raising fears of a return to the rampant violence and killing that marked the civil war years of 1992 to 1996. All of the major candidates' speeches and policies are very similar. They make the same sweet-sounding promises, but we are not fooled. Afghans remember how Karzai abandoned his campaign pledges after winning the 2004 vote.

We Afghans know that this election will change nothing and it is only part of a show of democracy put on by and for the West, to legitimize its future puppet in Afghanistan. It seems we are doomed to see the continuation of this failed, mafia-like corrupt government for another term.

The people of Afghanistan are fed up with the rampant corruption of Karzai's "narco-state" government – his own brother, Wali Karzai, has been linked to drug trafficking in Kandahar Province – and the escalating war waged by NATO. In May of this year, U.S. air strikes killed approximately 150 civilians in my native province, Farah. More than ever, Afghans are faced with powerful internal enemies – fundamentalist warlords and their Taliban brothers-in-creed – and the external enemies occupying the country.

Democracy will never come to Afghanistan through the barrel of a gun, or from the cluster bombs dropped by foreign forces. The struggle will be long and difficult, but the values of real democracy, human rights and women's rights will only be won by the Afghan people themselves.

So not be fooled by this façade of democracy. Your governments in the West that claim to be bringing democracy to Afghanistan ignore public opinion in their own countries, where growing numbers are against the war. President Obama in particular needs to understand that the change Afghans believe in does not include more troops and a ramped up war.

If the populations of Afghanistan and the NATO countries were able to vote on this military occupation it could not continue indefinitely, and peace would finally be within reach.

Malalai Joya was the youngest Member of the Afghan Parliament elected in the 2005 elections. Her memoir, A Woman Among Warlords (Scribner), will be published this October.