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Karzai Effectively Wins Afghan Vote as Count Nears End

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KABUL, Afghanistan, Oct. 24 - President Hamid Karzai has won the majority of votes in the Oct. 9 election, results posted Sunday on the election commission's Web site show, effectively securing his position as Afghanistan's first popularly elected president.

Mr. Karzai, who had been widely expected to win, received more than 4.2 million votes - more than half of the estimated ballots cast. Under the election rules, any of the 18 candidates must receive 50 percent plus one vote to win, avoiding the necessity of a runoff. The presidential term is five years.

While the official, final tally is not due until Oct. 30 and some other candidates have refused to concede and continued to accuse Mr. Karzai of vote fraud, election officials and outside election observers said it was not possible for him to lose his overall majority.

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"We won, that's 100 percent sure," said Hamid Elmi, campaign spokesman for Mr. Karzai. "The counting process is not quite finished, and there are ballot boxes still in quarantine, but I should say that we have succeeded," he said.

Results posted on the Internet by the Joint Electoral Management Board, an Afghan and United Nations election commission, showed Mr. Karzai way ahead by Sunday evening, with 94 percent of the votes counted.

He had 55.3 percent of the vote. His nearest rival, the former education minister, Muhammad Yunus Qanooni, had 16.2 percent.

Among the other candidates, the Hazara Shia leader, Muhammad Mohaqeq, received 11.8 percent, and the Uzbek general, Abdul Rashid Dostum had 10.3 percent. The only woman presidential candidate, Masooda Jalal, was running sixth, with 80,922 votes, or 1.1 percent. Nonetheless, her showing was a landmark for a woman in Afghan politics.

While the two-week counting process was near an end, ballots from the most remote province, Badakhshan, and the two other regions representing Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan, were still to be counted.

The election was widely regarded as remarkably peaceful, despite incidents of violence and threats from insurgents loyal to the ousted Taliban rule. Elections observers from the European Union and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, who fielded barely 122 international observers around the country, have described the election as an "orderly and transparent process."

Mr. Karzai's main rivals declined to comment on the results until all the votes were counted and

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results of an investigation into irregularities by an international panel of experts is presented Monday. Mr. Qanooni's representatives acknowledged Mr. Karzai's lead, but said they would not react until final results were released.

Fifteen ballot boxes remain in quarantine, subject to investigation by the panel of three international election officials, but the bulk of the 100 boxes originally put aside because of complaints of fraud have been released and included in the counting, the United Nations spokesman, Manoel de Alemida e Silva, said.

Opposition candidates were sticking to their complaints that large-scale election fraud had occurred in favor of Mr. Karzai. "Definitely I should say there was a lot of cheating, and we want to congratulate to Mr. Karzai on the election that he is winning as a result of a large-scale fraud and cheating," Dr. Yassa, a representative of the Shia Hazara leader Muhammad Mohaqeq, said in a telephone interview.

Latif Pedram, who was running in fifth place with 1.2 per cent of the vote, said widespread fraud had occurred, which he described as "completely shameful."

"It is obvious for everyone that Karzai could not get 15 percent of the votes if the election had been fair. Now if Karzai, or anybody else, becomes the president of the country as a result of this election, he will be a false president," Mr. Pedram said.

Mr. Karzai's victory is not the landslide that he and his Western backers had hoped for. He has found overwhelming approval among his fellow ethnic Pashtuns in the south and east, winning 90 percent of the vote in some of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. Yet he has made a poor showing in much of the north, where voters tended to vote according to their ethnic group, supporting the main Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara candidates.

His two vice-presidential running mates, the Hazara leader Karim Khalili, and the Tajik Ahmed Zia Massoud, the brother of the legendary resistance commander Ahmed Shah Massoud, failed to bring in the vote from their respective ethnic groups. Diplomats here said Mr. Karzai will have to repair relations with the ethnic minorities who dominate the north, and balance that with acknowledgement of the support he won in the south.

"He has to think of a more coherent policy towards the Hazaras and the north, which has not been managed well," said one foreign diplomat. "And for the Pashtuns, who have given him such a vote, he has to get reconstruction going in their areas, and continue a policy of dialogue with moderate Taliban," the diplomat said.

The need for compromise between north and south, between Pashtuns who have always ruled Afghanistan and the northern tribes who want more rights for their people and between the Pashtuns who largely supported the Taliban movement and those who fought it, has often made Mr. Karzai's interim administration ineffectual.

Diplomats are hoping for a strong government that will tackle disarmament, narcotics control, corruption and institutional change, areas in which Mr. Karzai has largely failed to make an impact.

Mr. Karzai was outspoken in the weeks before the vote, often promising that if he won he would no longer put up with a tricky coalition government, but would form a government from like-minded people who will follow his own agenda.

Yet diplomats and United Nations officials are already warning that he will have to find ministers from among the ethnic minorities to join his cabinet and answer to the widespread public dissatisfaction in the north.

The most immediate task of the next government should be to prepare for parliamentary elections, set for the spring, but widely expected to be held in the summer or fall, said Jean Arnault, the leader of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan.

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