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SNTV in Afghanistan: Is There a Better Option?

Abstract

Afghanistan is a country of turmoil, as it has been for the last five decades. This sets a precarious stage for political development, especially in the realm of creating a stable and efficient electoral system. Currently, Afghanistan is one of four countries that use the Single Non-Transferable Vote system. Issues of ethnic, linguistic, and geographic cleavages; war and instability in everyday life; lack of developed political culture; lack of education; and gender inequality are of importance in this case. The overall conclusion for Afghanistan is that SNTV adequately addresses only gender inequality and partly ethnic cleavages. A better choice might be a closed-list PR system that jump-starts party formation and interethnic conciliation, as well as presents adequate representation of all ethnicities.

SNTV IN AFGHANISTAN: IS THERE A BETTER OPTION?

Sara T. Ghardiri

Abstract: *Afghanistan is a country of turmoil, as it has been for the last five decades. This sets a precarious stage for political development, especially in the realm of creating a stable and efficient electoral system. Currently, Afghanistan is one of four countries that use the Single Non-Transferable Vote system. Issues of ethnic, linguistic, and geographic cleavages; war and instability in everyday life; lack of developed political culture; lack of education; and gender inequality are of importance in this case. The overall conclusion for Afghanistan is that SNTV adequately addresses only gender inequality and partly ethnic cleavages. A better choice might be a closed-list PR system that jump-starts party formation and interethnic conciliation, as well as presents adequate representation of all ethnicities.*

Afghanistan is a country of turmoil, as it has been for the last five decades. This, as well as the current United States-led occupation, sets a precarious stage for political development, especially in the realm of creating a stable and efficient electoral system. After years of control by the Taliban and feuding warlords, Afghanistan is attempting to join the ranks of democratized nations, but it is not a quick or simple journey. Afghanistan has many problems, socially and politically, that need to be addressed in the creation of a working electoral system. Currently, Afghanistan is one of four countries that use the Single Non-Transferable Vote system. While that system has certain benefits, there are many concerns left poorly- or un-addressed.

The best way to assess the system in Afghanistan is to systematically analyze the issues that face Afghanistan as a nation. These include issues of ethnic, linguistic, and geographic cleavages; war and instability in everyday life; lack of developed political culture; lack of education; and gender inequality. From there, I will move to analyzing Afghanistan's current system. Finally, I will note which system or systems would best address each of the concerns. First, however, we must examine the current system in place in Afghanistan.

As mentioned before, Afghanistan uses the SNTV system. This system allows voters to cast a single vote for individual candidates, not political parties. Each electoral district (or province, in the case of Afghanistan) elects a certain number of representatives, and each voter can only vote for one candidate. The top vote-getters win the seats, regardless of what percentage they actually get (Reynolds 211).¹ This can pose a problem when one individual gets 70 percent of the vote, for example, and the next two top vote-getters trail significantly. Not only that, but candidates run against others of their own party (if parties exist) so that they could potentially be splitting their base of votes and end up with neither getting a seat. This Single Non-Transferable Vote system means that a party can get the majority of votes and not get a majority of seats. The system also tends to lose efficacy in cases where the district magnitude is high.

¹ Andrew Reynolds. "The Curious Case of Afghanistan." In *Electoral Systems and Democracy (A Journal of Democracy Book)*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006): 43-55.

There are, however, advantages of using the SNTV system. It is simple both for voters and administrators, in that voters have to select only one candidate and there are no complex mathematics necessary to determine the winner.² Because of the individual-centric nature of the system, SNTV also works with a nascent party system. In addition, SNTV increases accountability, as individuals vote for a certain candidate and thereby believe they have a vested interest in the system.

SNTV came to be used in Afghanistan after a very interesting turn of events. After a botched explanation of a closed-list PR system by Enayat Qasmi, the individual charged with explaining the system to the Wolesi Jirga, Hamed Karzai asked the Joint Election Management Body (JEMB) to compile a list of electoral systems that would allow voters to vote for an individual candidate.³ Since single member districts were already out of the question, SNTV was selected as what they determined to be the "least bad" choice based on the incorrect information given to the JEMB. This choice, in actuality, was more like a process of random elimination than a studied analysis.⁴ This indicates that Karzai and his cohorts did not choose SNTV based on an understanding of its consequences or history. Karzai also did not acquiesce to pressure to change from SNTV to a list-PR system, as he feared the opposition would benefit too much from using the list-PR system.⁵

Now that we have examined the existing structure, we can examine the issues that plague Afghanistan. The cleavage structure in Afghanistan is mainly split along ethnic, linguistic, and religious lines. Ethnically, the country is extremely fractured due to its location at the crossroads between East Asia and the Middle East. The population is distributed as follows: 42 percent Pashtun, 27 percent Tajik, 9 percent Hazara, 9 percent Uzbek, 4 percent Aimak, 3 percent Turkmen, 2 percent Baloch, and 4 percent other.⁶ It is important to note, however, that these statistics are not fully agreed upon. Especially in the time leading up to the last election, there was much disagreement between the UN and Afghans about the "size and composition of the Afghan population."⁷ No census has been conducted to date, and although one was scheduled for June 2008, it has been postponed for two years. Even now, there has been little large-scale movement towards a census except for a development in March 2010, where American Marines have been assigned to "learn the names of each village, and who the residents are along with other information to have a better understanding of the villages."⁸ The only data that exists besides this

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ CIA World Factbook.

⁷ Alexander Their and Jarat Chopra, "The Road Ahead: Political and Institutional Reconstruction in Afghanistan," *Third World Quarterly* 23 (2002): 893-907.

⁸ Dwight A. Henderson, "Marines conduct census patrols to better understand surrounding villages," *United States Marine Corps 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade*, available from <http://www.marines.mil/unit/iimef/2ndmef/Pages/Marinesconductcensuspatrolstobetterunderstandsurrondingvillages.aspx>. Internet; accessed 16 Feb 2010.

very new attempt are from an incomplete attempt at a survey from 1979, which leaves little data with which to work.⁹

The country's ethnic divides are subsequently reinforced through the myriad languages in use in Afghanistan. While only two of these are official languages, the estimations of distributions are as follows: Afghan Persian or Dari (official) 50 percent, Pashto (official) 35 percent, Turkic languages (primarily Uzbek and Turkmen) 11 percent, 30 minor languages (primarily Balochi and Pashai) 4 percent.¹⁰ In terms of the religious divide, it is less significant, however, it is important to note that 80 percent of the country is Sunni Muslim, and 19 percent are Shia Muslim. These Shia are mostly ethnic Hazaras.¹¹

Hazaras, as a result, have been subjugated and defined as "underclass," while the Pashtun have been in control of Afghanistan essentially since 1747.¹² Social mobility was confined mostly to the Pashtun as well.¹³ This sets an uneasy table for interethnic conciliation, leading the Pashtun to believe that they should be in charge, while the Hazara believe they should have more voice because of their subjugation. The conflict since 1992 has all essentially been ethnically based, and the leaders of rival factions have exploited ethnicity for their own personal gains.¹⁴

These ethnic cleavages must be addressed in the electoral system with the ultimate goal of formation of a representative parliament. Proponents of proportional representation would argue that the most important aspect should be attempting to exactly represent the ethnic proportions that exist in the population in the parliament. With a proportional system, the legislature would accurately represent the interests of all citizens and allow all to have a proportional voice in government.¹⁵ This would also facilitate interethnic conciliation among political leaders via coalition building, as parties would be forced to use bridging strategies before elections to reach across ideological gaps to form coalitions and create effective governments once the parties got elected.

The ethnic, linguistic, and religious cleavages are reinforced further by geography. The Tajiks are inhabitants of northeastern Afghanistan, while Uzbeks and Turkmen live in the northwest. Hazaras inhabit Central Highlands, and the Pashtun live primarily in southern Afghanistan.¹⁶ Within these groups, there are even further splits by tribe—for example, there are

⁹ Beth DeGrasse, "The New Afghanistan's Parliament: Challenges and Opportunities." United States Institute of Peace: Committed to the Prevention, Management, and Peaceful Resolution of International Conflicts.. Available from <http://www.usip.org>. Internet; accessed 8 February 2009.

¹⁰ CIA World Factbook.

¹¹ Sven G. Simonsen, "Ethnicising Afghanistan?: Inclusion and Exclusion in Post-Bonn Institution Building," *Third World Quarterly* 25 (2004): 707-29.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Arend Lijphardt, "The Case for Power Sharing." In *Electoral Systems and Democracy* (A Journal of Democracy Book). Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. 43-55.

¹⁶ Jeffery J. Roberts, *The Origins of Conflict in Afghanistan*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003.

two main groups of Pashtun, the Durranis and the Ghilzais, both of which are fractured even further by individual tribes.¹⁷ This is the case with other ethnic groups as well, though not to the extent of the Pashtun case.

The fact that these groups live in geographically disparate areas creates a unique case in terms of system construction. Geography substantially impacts electoral districts and the way in which representatives are selected. Considering the use of ethnically homogeneous districts might be a way to address this issue, but potentially also has the possibility to create clan-based politics and further entrench the ethnic and linguistic divides that exist. In addition, district magnitude must also be considered in order to ensure that the districts are not so small that they become *de facto* single-member districts.¹⁸

Because of the ethnically fractured society, the issue of the multitude of languages poses other problems. Though much bilingualism is present, the fact that two official languages exist in addition to the large number of geographic and tribal languages automatically creates problems in terms of ballot formation. This is compounded by the extremely low literacy rate that will be discussed later.

The fact that Afghanistan has been in conflict, especially since the Soviet era, has also robbed Afghanistan of its opportunity to spread an understanding of democracy in the populace. From monarchy to war to authoritarian rule to war again, chronic instability has left Afghanistan with many ancillary problems. Citizens are currently under occupation and have interruptions of violence or the threat of violence daily. This violence and related issues surrounding the security of the nation and its ability to control its own borders greatly decreases its legitimacy, and that in turn decreases the legitimacy of government functions, including elections. The most recent elections in 2005 were rife with allegations of fraud, and in an emerging democracy, a legislature and executive that are viewed as illegitimate can be extremely problematic (Reynolds and Wilder 2004).¹⁹ Mostly, Afghanistan needs stable leadership to ensure that the government is kept honest and efficient despite the conflict. This is why it is imperative to have an electoral system that would help avoid corruption and increase legitimacy.

Another issue that stands in the way of democratization in Afghanistan is a political culture that has no history of democracy. The most recent past was dominated by authoritarianism and religious extremism under the Taliban. Voters faced "great distances, intimidations and violence, and dealing with administrative breakdown" just in order to register to vote.²⁰ The 2004 election,

¹⁷ Simonsen, Sven G, "Ethnicising Afghanistan?: Inclusion and Exclusion in Post-Bonn Institution Building," *Third World Quarterly* 25 (2004): 707-29.

¹⁸ Gary W. Cox, "Voting Equilibria Under the Single Nontransferable Vote." *American Political Science Review* 88 (1994): 608-21.

¹⁹ Andrew Reynolds and Andrew Wilder. "Free, Fair or Flawed: Challenges for Legitimate Elections in Afghanistan." Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit. <http://www.cmi.no/pdf/?file=/afghanistan/doc/AfghanElections-FreeFairorFlawed.pdf> (accessed February 8, 2009), Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit Issue Briefing Series, 2004.

²⁰ Ibid.

however, brought about the first democratically elected president in Afghan history. Throughout the history of Afghanistan, the populace has never had a chance to elect a head of state before. This new concept, the unfamiliarity with the democratic selection process, must be addressed when considering which electoral system might best address the issues facing the country. A society so inexperienced in the workings of democracy cannot be expected to be able to understand and process an extremely complex model, and therefore is less likely to brave challenging conditions if it perceives the process to be difficult or confusing.²¹ In addition, there is no party infrastructure to be able to facilitate voter education or provide guidance in the system.

The lack of parties in political culture poses other problems. With no democratic history, literacy, or experience, there is little organization around issues in the lower, house, the Wolesi Jirga. Politics are individual-centric and threaten to lack cohesion in consequent elections, further leading to parliamentary instability.²² Parties provide vehicles for voter information as well as programmatic platforms, both in majoritarian and proportional systems. Countries that lack this feature lack cohesion, direction, and efficiency, as there are no broad groups between which compromises can be made. In Afghanistan, these issues are compounded by the fact that much of Afghan politics is locally centered and based regionally.²³ This indicates that leadership is highly decentralized, which could potentially cause problems in party formation.

The problem isn't only one of democratic "illiteracy." Only 28.1 percent of the Afghan population is literate, and among women, the value is even lower, with only 12.6 percent literacy.²⁴ This poses an enormous problem in balloting, especially in cases where there are elections with huge slates of candidates. In the last elections, for example, each contender was assigned an individual icon graphic. In the cases of larger areas, like Kabul, this meant an inordinate number of candidates were on the ballot, often requiring the use of the same graphic in multiples. This added to the confusion, which can help explain the particularly problematic low turnout.²⁵ Without high enough turnout, the legitimacy of the government's mandate is questionable and legislatures might not accurately represent the population. Confusing ballots caused many of them to be returned unmarked or incorrectly marked, both a consequence of illiteracy and an incomprehensive understanding of voting and the democratic process.

Another strain on the political culture is tied to the low levels of education in the populace. Because of all of the conflict, the intelligentsia, skilled workers, and those who were highly educated left Afghanistan, leading to a "brain drain" in the country. With all of these individuals

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Sven G. Simonsen, "Ethnicising Afghanistan?: Inclusion and Exclusion in Post-Bonn Institution Building," *Third World Quarterly* 25 (2004): 707-29.

²⁴ CIA World Factbook.

²⁵ Andrew Reynolds and Andrew Wilder. "Free, Fair or Flawed: Challenges for Legitimate Elections in Afghanistan." Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit. <http://www.cmi.no/pdf/?file=/afghanistan/doc/AfghanElections-FreeFairorFlawed.pdf> (accessed February 8, 2009), Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit Issue Briefing Series, 2004.

as expatriates, there are no individuals left to lead the country or to officiate elections. Because of this lack of direction, the electoral system must be kept simple, or otherwise the individuals charged with determining the winner of each individual race might not be able to discern which candidate wins. This high level of expatriation in addition to the large number of refugees also poses an issue in representation. It was estimated in 2002 that over one-third of the population had relocated.²⁶ This is quite a significant proportion of the population, and these individuals' voices must also be accounted for.

In addition to complications stemming from a poorly educated populace, there are also cultural issues regarding gender equality that must be addressed. In Islam, women are not afforded the same opportunities as men, and consequently the culture is not as inviting or receptive to females in leadership roles or as prominent members of society (Their and Chopra 902).²⁷ Taliban rule took this to an extreme, not allowing women voting rights, equal rights in the eyes of the law, or even the right to show their faces in public. Islam teaches modesty and urges women not to draw attention to themselves, which is contrary to strategies for getting elected. Once this barrier is crossed, however, there is still the issue of whether or not men or even more traditional women would elect them. The electoral systems literature suggests that creating reserved seats or quotas for women in parliament, as well as using proportional representation would solve this problem and increase the number of women elected.²⁸ Reserved seats save a certain number of seats for women only, assuring them a seat in the legislature. Quotas, either statutory or voluntary, make sure certain numbers of women make it into parliament based on party lists and thereby ensure that their voices will be heard. As women are a significant part of any population, it is imperative that descriptive representation also include women. Proportional representation with large district magnitude also helps women, as the more opportunities exist for seats within each district, the more likely women will be able to capture those seats or party gatekeepers will balance the ticket with women.²⁹

Now that we have assessed the potential areas that should be addressed in the formation of an electoral system, we can assess how well Afghanistan's current system, which uses SNTV, deals with these issues. Andrew Reynolds noted some issues that he thought would be of consequence prior to the most recent elections: translation of votes into seats, the party system, the vote itself, the ability of the elected government to govern, and female representation.³⁰ These five issues loosely correlate with the concerns of the literature in choosing a system: ethnic, linguistic, and geographic cleavages fall with votes into seats; the ability to govern correlates with war and instability in everyday life; parties with lack of developed political culture; the vote itself with under-education; and gender inequality with female representation.

²⁶ Simonsen, "Ethnicising Afghanistan?" 707-29.

²⁷ Alexander Thier and Jarat Chopra, "The Road Ahead: Political and Institutional Reconstruction in Afghanistan," *Third World Quarterly* 23 (2002): 893-907.

²⁸ Pippa Norris, *Electoral Engineering: Voting Rules and Political Behavior* (Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics) (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Reynolds, "The Curious Case of Afghanistan," 43-55.

In terms of Reynold's analysis, he notes that the votes-into-seats for the most part worked. According to estimates, the parliament reflects the composition of the electorate. These candidates, however, did not receive most of the votes from the electorate. The percentage of wasted votes is extremely high: 68 percent of ballots were cast for losing candidates. This indicates that while the proportion of candidates of different cleavages roughly corresponds to that of the population, the individuals in the legislature were not elected by the majority of the population. In reference to parties, it is clear that SNTV set back the formation of political parties, and in fact, most likely, legislation will not be able to be passed effectively. Thirty-three separate parties, factions, and coalitions exist, but none have widespread support or clear platforms. Reynolds mentions that the only blocs that really exist are pro- and anti-Karzai factions, and neither of them have real cohesion.

As far as producing a government that is capable, results remains to be seen. Due to the huge number of parties and factions in the legislature, it appears that passing any sort of legislation will be extremely difficult. Karzai's large opposition does not help the fact. In terms of having a clear and effective vote, many found the incredibly large ballots with confusing symbols to be insurmountable. Five percent of ballots were invalid or spoiled, a remarkably high number in comparison to about one percent in South African and Iraqi elections.³¹ Turnout dropped between the presidential and legislative election, which is again in contrast to similar fledgling elections in Iraq. There were high levels of voter confusion, leading to decreased legitimacy in the election.

It seems as though the only positive with SNTV was in the area of women's representation. The effect of fragmentation due to SNTV allowed nineteen women to enter parliament independent of the quota system. The women, on the whole, did not get elected because of their popularity, but rather won by default. Many males still doubt their abilities regardless of whether they won by popularity or default.³² It also remains to be seen if women will take an active or passive role in government. They form a significant voting bloc, but time will tell if they exercise that power.

We can thus conclude that in terms of addressing our concerns of ethnic, linguistic, and geographic cleavages; war and instability in everyday life; lack of developed political culture; lack of education; and gender inequality, SNTV adequately addresses only gender inequality and, partly, ethnic cleavages. This leads us to the fact that perhaps SNTV is not the best choice. A better choice might be a closed-list PR system that jump-starts party formation and interethnic conciliation, as well as presents adequate representation of all ethnicities. Though it might lead to more unstable government, it would help women get more of a voice and also facilitate an easier voting system based on parties instead of individuals.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.