

Better than the alternative

The timing of the presidential election is bogged down in a political quagmire.

When political impasse last loomed in Kabul, in 1992, it ended with the then prime minister bombarding the presidential palace with rockets. This time the verbal volleys are fierce, but hostilities show no sign of migrating from the floor of the parliamentary chamber. For that Afghans will be thankful. Nonetheless, this is the first bout of political turmoil Afghanistan has faced since it adopted a constitution in 2004.



Karzai estimates the size of his support

At issue is the date of a presidential election and the right of President Hamid Karzai to remain in office until it occurs. Under Afghanistan's constitution the president must step down on May 21st, and elections must be held 30 to 60 days earlier, ie, by April 21st at the latest.

Last month the independent Election Commission postponed the vote, on security and logistical grounds, until August, in line with a year-old consensus. But since November last year that consensus has frayed. Opposition leaders have hardened their position, demanding that if Mr Karzai wants to contest the election in August, he should step down in May, though it is unclear how the vacuum would be filled. If he stays in office until August, they argue, he should refrain from standing for re-election.

Mr Karzai, for his part, appears determined to stand from the presidential palace. Few doubt that the stature and trappings of the office, notably the power of patronage and appointment, give the incumbent a significant advantage at the polls. So on February 28th Mr Karzai changed tack, perhaps with a view to wrong-footing his opponents. He called for a reversion to the original April timetable. This is impossible: 170,000 election workers are not yet trained; 18m ballot papers are not yet printed; and 17,000 additional foreign troops to ensure security during the elections have not yet arrived. On March 4th the Election Commission overruled the president and upheld the August schedule.

The commission, however, cannot plug the constitutional gap. Mr Karzai will argue that he has striven to abide by constitution, and hope to remain in office. If he does, the opposition will seek to wring concessions in exchange, such as a big paring down of his powers. If compromise is impossible, Mr Karzai could declare a state of emergency in late May, giving himself an automatic two-month extension. He would then need to appeal to parliament for a further one month to limp on until the August polls. This would damage his political standing, and create friction.

Behind the current crisis, however, sits a longer-term and healthier process for a country more familiar with civil war than constitutional legality: that of learning to work within an untried and sometimes contradictory constitution.

The Economist, New York, 5 mar. 2009, Asia, online. Disponível em <www.economist.com>. Acesso em: 12 mar. 2009.

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