

Powerbrokers and the 2009 Presidential Elections

(U) PMESII¹ Reach-Back Team POINT PAPER **Unclassified sections only**

(U) Key Points:

- **(U) Karzai is the early favourite, however the emergence of a unified opposition combined with low Pashtun support could negatively impact his campaign.**
- **(U) Powerbrokers may be more important in the post-election environment than in the pre-election environment.**

Background:

(U) The purpose of this report is to gauge the potential role of powerbrokers in the upcoming Afghan presidential election. The two key questions answered are what kind of role will powerbrokers play in the elections and when will they play that role? To do this we must bear in mind two things: where political power resides in Afghanistan and the nature of powerbrokers. Political power is spread out among tribal authorities, large landowners, religious leadership, educated elites, current GIRoA officials, military forces (legal and illegal), and powerbrokers. All of these sources even when combined represent a small fraction of the overall Afghan population. They do not include the vast majority of rural Afghans who in economic terms subsist on various forms of agriculture. The majority of Afghans see informal political functions occur at the clan, village, and tribe level. Formal bureaucratic governance is entirely absent from the daily lives of rural Afghans, who comprise most of the total population. The physical makeup of Afghanistan combined with the absence of formal politics in large swaths of territory creates an authority vacuum filled by regional and local powerbrokers. Powerbrokers utilize geography, ethnicity, military and financial resources, and foreign support to gain, keep, and use their influence. That influence is used to further powerbroker's personal objectives but also to provide assistance to powerbroker supporters. The dual nature of powerbroker influence makes them a unique part of Afghan politics.

(U) Discussion:

(U) Key powerbrokers such as Dostum, Sayyaf, Atta, Hekmatyar, and Ismail Khan have influence over distinct geographic areas in Afghanistan. They hold sway over their respective areas and occasionally fight each other in limited turf wars. Thus far powerbrokers have not displayed national ambition; they have been content to stay in their regions. However, if competition for power and wealth become national struggles, powerbrokers may not be content to remain regional players. One issue that could surface during the Presidential elections capable of changing regional dynamics into national dynamics is perceived or actual Pashtun dominance of GIRoA. Powerbrokers

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can use Pashtun dominance of GIROA to stir up and harness fear among their own ethnic blocks. Building resentment towards perceived Pashtun domination could be an incentive for Afghanistan's ethnic minorities to cooperate. Cooperation among the ethnic minorities of Afghanistan could lead to a more unified opposition.

(U) The biggest electoral threat to a second term for Karzai is the emergence of a unified opposition. Combining the votes of Uzbeks, Hazaras, Tajiks, and Turkmen could challenge Karzai's ability to win the election outright. The combination of a unified opposition and low voter turnout among Pashtuns would be the worst of all electoral worlds from Karzai's perspective. It is unlikely a non-Pashtun could garner the necessary 50% of the popular vote needed to win the presidential election out right, but a run off would be a blow to Karzai's credibility in Afghanistan. Forcing a run off could be seen as a secondary objective or consolation prize for the opposition. A weakened President Karzai would be more susceptible to opposition political maneuvering after the election. In a tight race powerbrokers could play an important post-election role if the validity of the results comes into question.

(U) Conclusion:

(U) Logistical support for the election is critical. If the election is postponed for logistical reasons Karzai will likely come under increasing pressure from the opposition, his supporters as well as the international community. A delayed presidential election will have a ripple effect on the parliamentary elections scheduled for 2010. Powerbrokers may offer to help get votes for President Karzai and other candidates at the same time thus extracting multiple payments and setting themselves up to receive favours no matter who wins. It is against powerbroker interest to stay out of the election completely as such a course would bring them a lesser profit. Alliances made between powerbrokers towards an election objective are not likely to stay intact after the election. In the post election atmosphere there could be a rush by powerbrokers to cash in their favours leading to increased tensions and instability across the country. Powerbrokers pre-election activity would be maximized by working behind the scenes whereas after the elections they may openly move to the forefront. The period right after the election is critical; this is Afghanistan's first peaceful transition of power in a long time and it is the place powerbroker influence will count the most.