

# The World; Afghan Election System May Undermine Karzai; In the parliamentary poll set for Sept. 18, voters pick candidates, not parties, which could make it difficult for the president to govern.

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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## FULL TEXT

Afghans will go to the polls Sept. 18 to elect their parliament under a system that some experts say could make it difficult for President Hamid Karzai to govern this war-torn nation.

Bismillah Bismil, head of the joint Afghan and United Nations election commission, said Sunday that the election date had been set after consultations with U.N. officials, representatives of political parties and Karzai's administration.

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Afghanistan's parliamentary election, originally to be held with the country's presidential vote last October, was postponed because of technical problems, including drawing electoral boundaries and agreeing on an electoral system, officials said.

Analysts questioned the voting method that was finally selected for the parliamentary election, saying it could jeopardize the future of the government. The "single nontransferable vote," or SNTV system, as it is called, allows candidates to register as individuals with or without a party affiliation. Each voter casts one ballot for one candidate. If a province elects three representatives, the top three vote-getters win the seats.

"The meeting of ministers and election officials have decided on the SNTV system because Afghans are familiar with this system," Bismil said in an interview. "It was used in past elections in Afghanistan's history."

Election experts say that in a country with dozens of regional strongmen, a direct voting system will be less representative than a proportional representative system, in which voters select among nationally registered political parties rather than individual candidates.

In the SNTV system, for example, a local commander can win 60% of the votes in a province with five parliamentary seats. The second seat could go to a candidate who receives 25% of the votes. The last three seats would be filled by candidates who shared less than the remaining 15% of the votes.

"When you take a closer look, the SNTV election system doesn't do a good job of converting votes into seats," said Andrew Wilder, country director of the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, a think tank based in Kabul, the capital.

"With the single nontransferable vote system, the warlords and drug traffickers will do better, and there will be little incentive [for winning candidates] to cooperate" with other members of parliament, said Barnett Rubin, a New York University professor and former consultant to the United Nations on Afghanistan.

Karzai could benefit from the SNTV system because he wouldn't have to contend with powerful political parties, experts say.

He has boasted of being "party-free," a tactic that has won him support among Afghans who remember corrupt pro-communist political parties.

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Rubin acknowledged that a large number of Afghans, especially those who had lived through more than 20 years of Soviet occupation, civil war and Taliban rule, "associate parties with divisiveness, foreign agents and violence."

He added: "They think that the stability comes from a government of professional, educated, virtuous, respected people who have no political motivation."

Shabuddin Mahmood, 42, a Kabul resident, agreed: "Every day a new Afghan political party is formed. Many of them are run by former Communist Party leaders, and others are run by commander types. How do we know which party to trust?"

However Karzai might benefit from a lack of political parties, some experts say, he would be hard pressed to reach consensus in the parliament, which would have the power to pass key laws and review his policies.

"Having hundreds of independent parliamentarians to deal with will work against Karzai in building an effective government and lobbying for power in parliament," Dimitroff said.

Analysts also said that political parties could help Karzai secure agreement on issues of national concern.

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