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**AFGHANS PURSUE DEMOCRACY DESPITE VIOLENCE,  
NDI OBSERVER MISSION FINDS**

KABUL, AFGHANISTAN – Despite violence and threats of violence, Afghan citizens, often at great personal risk, participated in presidential and provincial council elections Aug. 20 in an effort to move their nation forward on a democratic path, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) said in a statement released here today.

“Aspects of the 2009 elections were in accordance with democratic principles,” the statement said. “The elections, however, also involved serious flaws that must be addressed in order to build greater confidence in the integrity of future elections.”

To address those shortcomings, NDI offered recommendations involving the oversight, conduct and design of elections, security, reform of state media and the role of the international community.

NDI conducted an international election observation mission that mobilized more than 100 international and Afghan observers, covering all of the country’s regions and the capital, to observe every aspect of the election process, including the campaign, balloting on election day and the post-election period. The group came from 11 countries on six continents and included current and former government officials, political party and election officials, legislative staff, representatives of democracy and human rights organizations, and academics.

The delegation was led by former U.S. Senator Gary Hart; Karl Inderfurth, former U.S. assistant secretary of state for South Asian affairs; John Manley, former Canadian deputy prime minister and foreign minister; Nora Owen, former minister of justice in Ireland; Karin von Hippel, co-director of the Post-Conflict Reconstruction Project and senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies; Jamie Metz, executive vice president of the Asia Society; Kenneth Wollack, president of NDI; and Peter Manikas, NDI’s director of Asia programs.

The delegation noted that the security situation in Afghanistan prevented observer groups, including NDI, from operating in some parts of the country. It emphasized that it was not rendering a final assessment because the tabulation of results and the complaints process have yet to be completed. A final report will be issued when those activities are concluded.

NDI observers saw the elections unfold in different ways. In places where Afghans were able to organize the polls without violence or the threat of violence – in most provinces of the north, west and central regions – the process on election day was generally orderly. In areas of the south and southeast and in pockets of the central region, extremist violence disrupted the voting and appeared to repress voter turnout, especially among women.

“While the threats and acts of violence had a significant negative effect on aspects of the election, ultimately violence did not derail the process as many had feared,” the delegation said.

Noting that the 2009 polls were the country’s first to be organized primarily by Afghan institutions, NDI said “Afghanistan’s political system is more competitive at every level than many have believed.”

Major presidential candidates crossed traditional ethnic lines and campaigned in all areas of the country, often attracting large and enthusiastic crowds. Candidates focused on platforms and issues, which was not the case in the last round of elections in 2004 and 2005. The campaign also saw the nation’s first national debates that were seen and heard by millions of Afghans.

In many parts of the country, the elections were generally well-administered and conducted in a generally transparent manner, the statement said. Election materials were delivered on time to trained polling station staff, and international and domestic observers as well as political party agents were present in polling centers.

But overall, the delegation said, “much work is needed to improve the electoral administration.” A lax registration process led to multiple registrations and registration of ineligible voters, which “increases the potential for fraud and other types of misconduct and could erode the Afghan people’s confidence in the integrity of the electoral process and in the institutions that emerge from the polls.”

Other abuses, such as misuse of state resources and proxy voting that persist in some areas, can adversely affect the credibility of the elections, it said. Additionally, the Independent Election Commission (IEC), whose members are appointed by the president without legislative oversight, is viewed as less than independent. “While the commission performed many of its responsibilities well, its credibility depends not only on its actions but on the public’s perception of its impartiality,” NDI said.

The delegation statement said the rights of women require special attention. “Despite the growing numbers of women engaged in the political process, barriers still prevent their full participation,” it said. Often women are targets of threats of violence that prevent them from campaigning freely, they are most vulnerable to practices such as proxy voting, and, because the photograph on their voting card is optional, are most vulnerable to identity fraud.

The delegation report offered 17 recommendations for improving Afghanistan’s electoral process. Among them were:

- The international community, in partnership with the Afghan government, should immediately begin preparing for the next election cycle.
- An accurate voters’ registry should be prepared.
- The Wolesi Jirga, the lower house of the National Assembly of Afghanistan, should again review the manner of appointment for members of the Independent Election Commission.

The mission builds upon NDI’s 25 years of experience observing over 200 elections around the world and its significant election-related and operational experience in Afghanistan. The Institute arrived in Afghanistan in early 2002 and has since conducted programs to promote the participation of Afghan civic groups and political parties in the country’s political and electoral processes. A major component of NDI’s work involves building the capacity of provincial councils, the only elected bodies below the national level.

The Institute’s election observation mission in Afghanistan is funded through a grant from the U.S. Agency for International Development.

*The National Democratic Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working to support and strengthen democratic institutions worldwide through citizen participation, openness and accountability in government. More information is available at [www.ndi.org](http://www.ndi.org).*

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