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AFGHANISTAN

## A violent start to Afghan election campaign

The Afghan presidential campaign kicked off to a violent start as two of the former foreign minister's aides were killed over the weekend. Experts fear Islamist insurgents are likely to attack more campaigners.



No one expected the Afghan election trail to be without complications. The Taliban militants had warned they would target presidential candidates and unleash more violence in the run-up to the vote. The Islamist militants, who ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, reject parliamentary democracy and want to impose a strict form of shariah in Afghanistan. They have so far turned down the Afghan government's reconciliation offers.

As a precautionary measure, President Hamid Karzai's government had beefed up security, and provided each presidential candidate with armored vehicles and 35 police officers for protection.



Former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah is one of the front runners

But that didn't stop the insurgents from attacking the campaigners. On Saturday, February 1, two aides to Abdullah Abdullah, one of the 11 presidential candidates, were gunned down in front of their residence in the western province of Herat. The start to one of Afghanistan's most crucial elections could not have been worse.

The April 5 vote is largely viewed as a key test of the effectiveness of the Afghan national army in securing the country as international troops

prepare for a drawdown by the end of the year.

"We have taken precautions and are trying to work closely with presidential candidates to make sure that what happened on Saturday would not be repeated. I am hopeful that it will not happen again," Umer Daudzai, Afghanistan's interior minister said in a press conference.

### Threats

Many in Afghanistan are, however, not as hopeful as Daudzai. Arefa Alizada, an 18-year-old supporter

of Abdullah, told news agency AFP she is concerned about security during the election, especially after the killings of two campaigners.

DW.DE

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Islamabad has launched an offensive against militant Islamists in its northwestern region. In response, Islamists, too, have intensified their attacks.

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"If the situation worsens, me and many other people won't be able to vote," she said.

Nils Wörmer, head of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Afghanistan believes the Islamists will increase their attacks in the coming months. "The attacks have a direct correlation to the Afghan vote," Wörmer told DW, adding that the candidates, the campaign workers, as well as the members of Afghanistan's election commission could be potential targets.

### Security

Security is the most important issue in Afghanistan and is likely to dominate the election campaign. President Karzai and the United States continue to disagree on a proposed security deal which would allow some US troops to operate in Afghanistan after the NATO drawdown. American personnel are expected to train the Afghan security forces as they struggle to cope with the persistent Taliban insurgency.

The Afghan Loya Jirga, a grand assembly of about 2,500 tribal leaders and other influential Afghans, had expressed their support for the so-called Bilateral Security Agreement in November 2013. However, Karzai has repeatedly refused to sign the pact. Experts say the president is leaving the issue to his successor.

"The continuation of West's assistance to Afghan forces is essential to the security of Afghanistan and also the next government in Kabul," Siegfried O Wolf, a South Asia expert at Heidelberg University, told DW. "Any further delay of a security agreement between Kabul and Washington will further destabilize the country. In addition, it will encourage the Taliban and other Islamist groups to step up their militants activities," he added.

The analyst believes the upcoming presidential elections are the most crucial juncture in Afghanistan's democratic transition. Yet he says the country's political institutions should prove that they can work in a way that the Afghan people can regain their trust and enthusiasm in democratic processes.

"Afghanistan's political and administrative system is in urgent need of reforms. The April 5 election is only one step towards the consolidation of democracy. The Karzai government hasn't done much in this respect. If people don't see any change, there is a big chance that the armed conflict will continue, probably on a larger scale," O Wolf said.

### Enthusiasm

Despite the turmoil and security fears, Afghans seem to be quite enthusiastic about the April vote. For them, there is much at stake in this election, and that is sufficient reason to participate in the campaign.

On Sunday, February 2, thousands of people took to the streets of Kabul to listen to the speeches of the candidates, who called on war-weary Afghans to vote for them.

Mursal, a business student in Kabul, says the future of his country is in the hands of young Afghans. "We will elect our candidates because we are the ones who will determine who forms the government," Mursal told DW. "We will vote for a better future. Our only demand from the candidate is that he works for the progress of Afghanistan."



Afghans are enthusiastic about April vote despite security concerns

Wörmer agrees: "People are talking about the election. They are concerned about security but there is certainly a great deal of interest in the electoral process itself," the expert said.