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LATEST

TRAVEL ADVISORY



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Afghanistan Parliamentary Elections 2018

KEY POINTS

- Travellers in Afghanistan should exercise heightened caution ahead of 20 October parliamentary and district elections.
- Numerous attacks have targeted those registering to vote, candidates and security forces in the build up to the election.
- There is an increased threat of militancy, as well as social unrest, in the days leading up to polling day, as well as after the vote; highlighting the need for additional precautions.



SITUATIONAL SUMMARY

Political: The delayed Afghan parliamentary and district council elections are scheduled to take place on 20 October, amidst concerns from international and national commentators over insecurity, voter registrations and calls by some political parties to change the electoral system. Road travel within the Kabul is a chief concern for travellers due to an elevated risk of widespread protest action and candidate rallies; both of which also present a credible target for militant groups.

Both the Taliban and the Islamic State's (IS) local branch (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province) have shown the capability and desire to disrupt the electoral process by carrying out attacks throughout the country. The Taliban have called on their supporters to boycott the elections and to undermine the electoral process by perpetrating attacks against security infrastructure in the lead up to the elections. Additionally, since IS established themselves in the east of the country, they have launched numerous attacks on Shia rallies both in Kabul and further afield. At least 80 people were killed in July 2016 following a targeted attack on a Hazara protest.

Attacks have also targeted political rallies recently. On 2 October, an attack on a rally in the eastern province of Nangarhar killed 13 people and wounded more than 40. On 9 October, at least 14 people were killed, including a candidate for parliamentary elections, after an explosion struck a rally in Lashkar Gah. Moreover, campaign offices and electoral officials have been targeted. For example, on 7 October, the Taliban carried out an attack against the chairman of the Independent Election Commission (IEC) in Kabul and, on 9 October, a suicide attack targeted a candidate's office. On Wednesday morning, 17 October, another official was among four people killed after an IED was planted under his chair in the province of Helmand.



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The Taliban have sought to take military advantage following the redeployment of Afghan security forces to urban centres. On 14 October, the police chief in Mizan, southern Zabul Province, was killed in armed clashes with Taliban insurgents. On the same day, 21 troops were killed at two checkpoints in the district of Posht-e Rud, Farah Province. The group is currently engaged in fighting for the city of Ghazni; located on a key highway linking Kabul to the country's south. Polling has been cancelled in Ghazni as a result of the ongoing fighting.

There have also been widespread allegations of fraud ahead of the vote. Voter registration has long been an issue undermining the integrity of Afghan elections. During the 2009 and 2014 presidential elections and 2010 parliamentary elections, between 10 and 25 percent of ballots were voided by the electoral authority. As a result, protests demanding anti-fraud measures shut down the offices of Afghanistan's election commission in three of the country's major provinces. On 11 August, the Electoral Complaints Commission barred 35 candidates from standing. Many of those excluded from standing have disputed the decision and, together with their supporters, blocked and shut down numerous offices of the Independent Election Commission (IEC) throughout the country. Adversely, many others believed that more candidates should be disqualified as per Afghan electoral law.

SOLACE GLOBAL COMMENT

The election will transpire in an adverse security environment where attacks by both the Taliban and IS are likely to occur. The numerous attacks over the weekend of the 15-16 October demonstrate the serious threat facing the security forces ahead of the elections. Afghan authorities have announced a 48-hour silence period will be in place on 18 and 19 October and there will also be a delayed announcement of the results in an effort to curb potential unrest and attacks on the electoral process. As such, the preliminary results are not scheduled to be released until 10 November with the final results be released on 20 December.

It is hoped that these measures will moderate any civil unrest or violence in the country prior to, during and following the vote. In addition to these measures, on election day, three security cordons will be created at each polling centre in order to protect voters' safety. These measures will be placed at various distances around each polling station. The Afghan National Army will be stationed at a distance of 3,000 to 5,000 metres with the police station at the third security belt. While such cordons are likely to offer an enhancement to security for voters, they will likely add to travel disruption, creating potential choke points vulnerable to attacks by militants.

Despite these measures, militant groups remain likely to target polling stations during the election. There has been an increase in the frequency and the scale of their attacks on political rallies during the campaigning period. Such attacks have targeted candidates and citizens wishing to engage in the electoral process, as well as security and government personnel. In May, insurgents killed at least 86 people enrolling to vote in Kabul during a registration drive by the Afghanistan government. A month earlier, a suicide bomber killed 60 people when he blew himself up near a crowd lined up outside a voter registration centre in Kabul. IS claimed responsibility for both these attacks as well as a number of other, smaller, attacks.

According to the IEC, five candidates had been killed before the election campaign started in late-September. Since then, a further five candidates have been killed, in Parwan, Ghazni, Kandahar, and Helmand; with a fifth wounded in Kabul, as well as another in the aforementioned attack in Helmand on 17 October. Convoys for three more candidates have been attacked in Kunar and, in two incidents, in Khost. These attacks all demonstrate the willingness and capability of militant groups to deliberately target the political process.

The possibility of protests surrounding the many issues affecting the country, including corruption, fraud and the ongoing dispute regarding biometric registration, are also likely; including following the final announcement on the 20 December. There is a high likelihood for violence during these rallies; especially should there be further allegations of vote rigging. These protests are also attractive targets for militant groups due to the opportunity to inflict a high number of casualties. On 16 July, police thwarted a suicide



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bomber from gaining access to a protest site during a political rally in support of Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum. On 11 September, 19 people were killed and 57 wounded following an explosion during a protest in Nangarhar Province. Further attacks have occurred in October; including on 2 October and 9 October.

Finally, to further complicate the situation, the United States is currently in talks with the Taliban. While the meeting has raised hopes that a meaningful peace and reconciliation process may be possible in Afghanistan. Failure in these talks could see an even greater intensity in attacks by the Taliban.

The challenges of holding elections in the current security environment has overwhelmed the capacity of the Afghan security forces. As a result, there is a severe risk that Afghan security forces will not be able to effectively secure key areas, leading to multiple attacks occurring across the country on the day of the election.

SECURITY ADVICE

SEVERE POLITICAL RISK



At a minimum, all travel to Afghanistan should be conducted alongside an accredited and comprehensive security provider, travellers should speak with their provider ahead of the election to understand their recommendations during the build up to, during and after, the election. It is strongly advised that no movement is carried out on 20 October throughout the country; travellers should stay in a secure location and monitor the latest media and Solace alerts.

Travellers should consider minimising movement outside of Kabul during the build up to the election and in the immediate aftermath of the vote.

Social unrest may require travel to, and movement within, the country to be restricted with little warning. Monitor events and be prepared to be flexible in your travel arrangements and itineraries.

Due to the heightened risk of unrest and militancy; avoid all polling stations, political party offices and gatherings.

Avoid all political rallies that occur during the election period; these rallies may turn violent with little notice and the current tactic of militant groups is to target demonstrations may result in the rally, or security personnel nearby, being targeted.

Traffic disruption is anticipated around all election related events, protests and polling stations. Major transportation hubs are subject to close in the event of widespread unrest or following a terror attack. Ensure that journeys are planned with multiple alternative route options in the event that preferred routes become blocked.

Travellers should remain aware that there has been an upscaling of security throughout major urban centres in Afghanistan, including additional checkpoints and security personnel. Such measures are likely to lead to road closures and delays on certain major routes, public spaces and market places. Liaise with local contacts regarding the feasibility of routes and carry all necessary documentation to ease passage through checkpoints.

Travellers should follow local media and use the Solace Secure app to stay up to date with security-related events including political protests. It is also important to maintain a heightened level of situational awareness and implement sensible security provisions.

Travellers are also advised to use Solace's travel-tracking technology with an intelligence feed for all travel in Afghanistan. This should enable a traveller to be alerted of any security updates within their vicinity and to update others of their movements in case of an emergency.

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