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**Ben Golnik: On the ground and at the polls in Afghanistan**

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In a world away from the 30-second attack ads, focus groups, public opinion polls and never-ending campaigns that characterize American politics, a remarkable experiment in democracy took place in Afghanistan last month when voters went to the polls to vote for president for only the second time.

I traveled to Afghanistan with a 29-member delegation organized by the International Republican Institute, a non-profit organization that has monitored more than 130 elections in 42 countries since 1983. Members of the delegation served as election observers in four cities across Afghanistan.

A number of issues arose before our arrival in Afghanistan that impacted the election. The media coverage on the state-owned television and radio outlets was strongly skewed toward the incumbent, President Hamid Karzai, in the weeks leading up to the election. In addition, threats of violence by the Taliban resulted in lower turnout, especially in the southern portion of Afghanistan where the Taliban presence is the greatest.

On Election Day, I observed voting at eight polling locations in Mazar-e-Sharif, the fourth largest city in Afghanistan, located in the north, near Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. As our vehicle bounced along dusty, unpaved roads, it was impossible to miss the numerous full color campaign posters plastered on lampposts and storefronts. Because of high illiteracy rates, election ballots contained candidates' photos, in addition to a symbol (ranging from a pigeon to a stethoscope to water pots) for each of the more than 40 candidates for president.

In order to enter a polling location, voters passed through a checkpoint manned by Afghan military or Afghan police (or both, in some instances). In most locations, the security officials used a handheld metal detector wand to screen those entering the polling stations.

While our group was required to wear body armor and travel in armored SUVs, it was inspiring to see so many people walking (some great distances) in the scorching heat to cast their ballots. As Afghani citizens patiently waited to vote, I was struck by the organized process - in a country that has seen little peace over the last few decades.

Here in the United States, voting is not much more than a blip on our busy schedules. We often wear a red "I Voted" sticker for the day and reflect little on the process until the next election. In Afghanistan, voters faced threats from the Taliban of cutting off the index finger of anyone who voted. It was awe-inspiring to watch voters exiting the polls, many of whom flashed their ink-stained fingers and then milled about the polling areas with friends and family. At each location, election officials reported few problems, and representatives from the presidential campaigns observed the process without incident.

Most of the polling sites I visited were in schools. There were separate polling centers for men and women, and female election workers administered the vote for the women. While polls opened at 7

a.m., one group of women I spoke with arrived at 5 a.m. and stood in line until 10 a.m. to vote. Just over five years ago, these women's daughters were banned from attending the schools where the women were now exercising their right to vote - many of them for the first time in their lives.

The initial returns from the presidential elections in Afghanistan showed a tight race between President Karzai and his primary challenger, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah. However, the latest results show Karzai with a commanding lead, 54 percent to 28 percent for Abdullah. Recent reports are troubling - and suggest widespread ballot stuffing and possible election fraud. If Karzai does not receive over 50 percent in the final vote tally, there will be a runoff in October.

Until the final vote is certified, it is too early to offer a full assessment of the presidential election. Having participated in dozens of campaigns here in the U.S. (most recently as a volunteer observer for the Coleman/Franken recount), I believe the elections were a positive step forward for the people of Afghanistan.

While great challenges certainly lie ahead, it was an amazing experience to witness the bravery and courage exhibited by the Afghan citizens who voted and are fighting to preserve their fragile democracy.

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