

Elections hold key to stability in south Asia.

Financial Times 'A'List. January 07, 2013

By Ahmed Rashid.

Two upcoming elections will be critical for the future stability of south and central Asia and for the continuing success in the struggle to defeat Islamic extremism.

The first are the [parliamentary elections in Pakistan](#) scheduled for next spring to elect a new government. In the next few weeks President Asif Ali Zardari and the opposition have to agree to a neutral caretaker government that would be in place for three months and would be responsible for holding the elections.

However, the [country faces widespread violence](#) and mounting casualties every day - an Islamic terrorist movement to overthrow the state in the northwest by the Pakistani Taliban, a separatist insurgency in Baluchistan province and mounting ethnic and mafia violence in the commercial capital Karachi. Some fear that as the violence escalates and the state loses control of large areas, the elections may not be held or held piecemeal.

These elections are also vital for the economy which faces a balance of payments crisis, high inflation, unemployment and massive corruption scandals but Mr Zardari has proved unwilling to tackle major economic reforms as demanded by the International Monetary Fund and the international community. Such reforms would now be left to the next government.

The elections - which have to be held at the latest by May 2013 - are unlikely to produce a clear winner and the next government is also likely to be a coalition of political parties. The significance of the elections is that it will be the first time in the country's history that one elected government which has seen out a full term will transfer power to another elected government. At the same time, despite the series of crises in the country there is [no threat of a military intervention](#) that could disrupt the democratic process.

Afghanistan will face a presidential election in early 2014 but much of the spade work for that election has to be carried out this year, especially as 2014 is also the year when the US and Nato will complete their troop withdrawal from Afghanistan.

It will be up to President Hamid Karzai in early 2013 to finalise the composition of the election commission and the rules for the elections. He is also likely to announce a candidate or raft of several candidates whom he would support to become the country's next president. Mr Karzai is illegible to stand again having served two presidential terms already.

It will be important that he stabilises the fraught political situation in the country by next spring and take steps that ensure a free and fair election - a key demand from 17 opposition parties and groups who have all demanded that he soon announce an electoral timetable and does not support his favoured candidate with government machinery or money.

It is vital for the west which is presently preoccupied with the military transition taking place by 2014, to focus more effectively on the political transition that will also take place that year and for which preparations must start as soon as possible.

At the same time there has been a renewed boost to the possibility of peace talks between the Americans, the Afghan government and the Taliban with the recent change in Pakistan's policy towards the Taliban, which it is now encouraging to seek a political settlement with Kabul. This makes the preparations for the elections in 2013 that could include [long and complicated talks with the Taliban](#) and the holding of them in 2014 even more important. Afghanistan needs a safe and secure political transition from Mr Karzai to the next man and from dependency on the west to greater self-reliance.