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KABUL — The election is over, and the people of Afghanistan have won. Months of setting up for this important day, including a voter-registration surge at the end, translated into success at the polls and significance for people's lives.

The presidential election where the incumbent, Hamid Karzai, has just won a second term? No. That one will take place on Oct. 9.

This was an election where small, large and medium-sized Afghan firms from all over the country were represented by their leaders and managers in building a new cornerstone institution for themselves and the future of Afghanistan. Not sexy, you're thinking? Well, think again. These are the people who are pushing for a market economy and fairness and transparency in government actions. These are the people who will grow a productive economy — one not based mostly on charity — and provide the necessities of life through gainful employment in lasting jobs that can substitute for employment by warlords or drug lords.

That's important if there is to be a viable Afghanistan.

Business is the only force that can cut through ethnic, tribal and religious barriers. It unifies by virtue of being blind to such differences. Yes, it can make warlords richer, but it also provides them with incentives for civility. Plus, it creates new centers of power in the society.

Three hundred people were expected; 2,500 showed up to vote. Obvious was their energy, their enthusiasm, their pride and their strength. They were creating one of those institutions that become a pillar of a free society, an economic power independent of the state.

In the words of the Afghan International Chamber of Commerce (AICC) interim president, Hamid Qaderi: "AICC seeks, and we have started to connect the business community to the very making of the policies, laws and regulations that determine the destiny of the private sector and a market economy in Afghanistan."

He added, "We create this strong voice, not only to promote our own dreams of enterprise for ourselves and our families, but the well-being of the people of Afghanistan, their children and their grandchildren. By promoting with our words and deeds the 'market economy' that our constitution designates for our country, we bring the possibility of a new prosperity to Afghanistan."

While it may not grab the headlines, there is real progress being made toward decentralizing economic power and building free markets — oft-underestimated but vital factors in achieving democracy.

This national shift in policy toward private enterprise in Afghanistan is also good news for an American public under a constant barrage of bad news from Afghanistan.

At a time when the media focuses on relatively few individual cases of death and destruction and whatever is going wrong in Afghanistan, many tens of thousands of

people are making positive contributions daily, far outweighing the bad news. It is important for the American people to know about the very special changes that are taking place, the sacrifices, the courageous acts, and the dedication to the betterment of family, community and country that goes on all the time.

Perspective and perseverance are not qualities of the news business, but they had better be our business because that is what it takes to succeed in Afghanistan.

Bringing up Vietnam is always dangerous, but it is so instructive for our times. Perhaps the most obvious case of snatching defeat from the jaws of victory was the Tet Offensive of 1968. However bloody and violent, it was a crushing military defeat for the Vietcong, curtailing their ability as a major fighting force from that time on. Yet it was played stateside by the media and the antiwar movement as a devastating defeat for the Americans.

The battle was won there and lost back home.

Afghans are a brave, persevering and deserving lot. The world owes them for their successful struggle to oust the Soviet Union from their country. Remember, the Soviets were at the top of their game when they invaded Afghanistan and at the bottom when they left. President Reagan had lots of help from the Afghan people, as well as vice versa. Afghans pricked the balloon of Soviet military invincibility, paving the way for the end to the Cold War. Poland left Moscow's clutches only months after the Russians' tail-between-the-legs departure and the dominoes fell shortly thereafter.

The Cold War was red-hot in Afghanistan, and 1.5 million Afghans lost their lives in an historic struggle. The world should help them recover. In time, and with the help of their friends, the Afghan people will deal with Taliban remnants and al Qaeda extremists. They know how to persevere. But does America? Will a constant drumbeat of negative noises over time drown out all the good things that are happening and discount the courageous acts of so many Afghans and their American partners?

Mr. Qaderi, who hails from Zabol province and a large and powerful Pashtun tribe known for its independence, went on to say: "We, Afghans, are accustomed to struggle and we are very good at it. Now, we are soldiers in a new form of struggle ... fighting two enemies — poverty and hopelessness — by giving our people real jobs, not militia and drug-trade employment, and by serving on the front lines in the battle to rebuild our country as quickly as possible."

When our citizens can view the ups and downs of a long struggle with some balance and recognize the contributions of all those who are engaged in building up, as well as those making news tearing down, we will gain the perspective that engenders perseverance. Our enemies, from the Cold War to the war on terror, counted then and count now on us having limited amounts of both.

We proved them wrong on the Cold War with just enough unity to prevail. Hopefully, we'll find "just enough unity" to do it again.

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