And so the charade begins once again. A state ripped apart by war, poverty and corruption promises to hold elections, and optimistic Western leaders pump in money and troops in a bid to ensure a window of comparative peace for the ballot. The battered populace votes, the results are declared and everyone proclaims the triumph of democracy in another land.

This time it is Afghanistan's turn again. More troops have been sent in to pacify the country for next month's elections, despite the sharply rising death toll. Gordon Brown said at the weekend that the "growth of democracy" and long-term stability will be the only winners there, while in the Commons debate this week, the Defence Secretary Bob Ainsworth stressed the importance of the elections.

There needs to be a heavy dose of realism. Once again, we are chasing a chimera, falling for the myth of democracy rather than the reality. Buttressed by our own history, we see the ballot box as the ultimate expression of democracy. In recent years, elections have spread into many places ruled by demagogues and dictators, and there is a widespread expectation that in their wake come new freedoms and prosperity. The assumption is that casting a vote somehow empowers citizens to seize control of their country.

But it takes more than an election to salvage a failed state. All too often, behind the façade of democracy is the same rotten, stinking edifice of murder, extortion and theft. The same big men stay in power, siphoning off state revenue and aid into offshore accounts, while nothing changes for the millions of people for whom voting is a brief interlude in the daily struggle for survival. In many cases, life gets worse.

Afghanistan itself offers a salutary warning. The last election in 2004 was hailed by Western leaders for installing democracy in the country. In truth, as Human Rights Watch exposed, there was massive intimidation of voters, journalists and political rivals. "Half of parliament are fundamentalists and warlords and criminals," says Wadir Safi, professor of political science at Kabul University. "Looters, smugglers – they are all there." And President Karzai has proved an embarrassing failure, allowing corruption to blossom, giving free reign to local despots and doing deals with the women-hating Taliban.

Now the country is gearing up for another election. Afghan diplomats in Washington tell think-tanks how the vote will empower women, the young and the disabled, while James Carville, the renowned Democrat strategist, is advising one of the main opposition candidates. The dream is back on. Meanwhile, warlords wash the blood from their hands and dress up as democrats, doing deals to carve up the country.

More...