

Afghan Youth Debates: All Candidates Bound by Laws

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All candidates standing in the race to succeed President Hamed Karzai as Afghan president must respect the rules of the ballot, election officials in the west of the country have warned.

Tareq Arian, regional head of the Independent Election Commission (IEC) in Herat province, said Afghanistan's future was dependent on a transparent, open vote free from allegations of corruption and fraud.

Those running must obey election legislation and ensure their campaigns adhered to what he called an acceptable "moral code". Voters must not be prevented from attending rallies and candidates were banned from using foreign funding to help finance their efforts, he said.

"Candidates must compete fairly and respect the laws of the election," Arian told students at an IWPR-backed debate on February 16. "They must not spend more than 175,000 [US] dollars on their campaigns, they must not insult one another, and they must not accept foreign funding. It's also crucial that no one blocks roads to prevent voters from travelling during the election campaign."

Afghanistan heads to the polls on April 5 to elect a successor to Karzai who is barred from standing again by the constitution. Provincial council elections will be held the same day.

The biggest challenge to both votes is the risk of widespread fraud. Corruption was found to be rife during the last presidential poll in 2009 and similar problems this time around could seriously undermine a peaceful transition of power.

Hamed Saljuqi, a reporter in Herat, told the debate that Afghanistan's electoral law had been designed to the same exacting standards expected by developed nations.

But he predicted that breaches of the rules would happen nevertheless, and said there was "no guarantee that what we see on paper will be implemented in practice".

"Provincial candidates' campaign expenses have been set at 500,000 afghani [8,700 dollars] and presidential candidates can spend a maximum of ten million afghani [175,000 dollars]," he said. "But I believe that if we look at each of the provincial candidates in Herat. we'll see that they've spent far more than the IEC has determined."

Mohammad Yunus Munir, regional head of the Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA) in Herat, outlined some of the regulations that candidates were required to comply with.

"Campaigns must be managed within the framework of the law," he said. "Candidates must be accountable, they must be transparent with their election expenses, they must not make use of government employees during official hours."

He added that so far, FEFA's Herat office had not received any reports of offences by any of the presidential candidates."

After the debate, one student said he had learnt a lot about the electoral process.

"It was very effective for me in particular," he said. "I now feel more inclined to take part, as I have greater confidence in the transparency of the process."

Harun Hakimi is a student at Herat University and an IWPR trainee.

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