

Afghan Youth Debates: Allegations of Election Staff Bias

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Allegations that Afghan election candidates have tried to get their own people into the Independent Election Commission (IEC) have been raised at an IWPR debate linking two provinces in the north and south of the country.

Students from the southern Kandahar province in the far south of the country said there were growing suspicions that a number of candidates had planted people inside the body responsible for supervising the April 5 ballot.

The IWPR debate took place on February 24, with a Skype link between audiences made up of students in Kandahar and the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif.

One student, Mukhtar Ahmad Amiri, asked the panellists whether they were aware of the rumours, and how this infiltration might affect the election if it were proved true.

"There are concerns that [campaign] teams have already placed their own men within the IEC to help interfere with the elections. To what extent is this true?" he asked.

Ezatullah Arman, the IEC's regional spokesman in the northern Balkh province, denied the allegation and insisted that staff hiring processes were fair and above-board.

"Our hiring procedure in line with the law," he said, adding that there was no way individual candidates could hijack it for their own ends.

The Kandahar panellists included Shirshah Reshad, director of the Bacha Khan Educational Training Centre, and economics lecturer Abdul Majid Hajizoi. As well as IEC official Arman, the guest speakers from Balkh included Hakim Hamidi, a spokesman for the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC).

Mohammad Nasim Nuri, a journalism student, told the debate that many undergraduates were concerned about the prospect of widespread fraud during the elections.

He claimed that civil society groups were still in their infancy, and ill-equipped in terms of both experience and numbers to be able to ensure effective monitoring of the ballot. More remote districts were especially vulnerable, he said.

"Don't you think the transparency of the vote will be questioned because of the lack of civil society organisations and other observer groups in more remote, unstable areas?" he asked.

Reshad replied that it was up to the IEC to counter the threat of corruption by putting enough people in place to observe the poll. He urged officials to form committees made up of "local elders and other influential individuals" that could assist with election monitoring.

Sana Azami, a student at Balkh University, asked the debate about women voting in the April 5 elections. Human rights organisations warn that prejudice against women will be a significant barrier to female participation.

Another participant asked, "How can it be guaranteed that women in Kandahar will be able to vote freely in the election and cast their ballot for their preferred candidate?"

Reshad said the Afghan security services had promised to make polling stations safe for voters.

"Forty per cent of voter registration cards distributed across Kandahar have gone to women," he said.

The undergraduates attending the video-link conference welcomed it as a rare chance to connect with people from another part of the country.

"Communicating and exchanging views to find ways of overcoming the real problems facing our society has been a good experience," Nuri said.

Nesar Ahmad is a student at Kandahar University and an IWPR trainee.

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