

Afghan Youth Debates: Candidates Accused of Lacking Policies

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Candidates vying to become Afghanistan's next president have been accused of failing to formulate meaningful policies in the run-up to the historic vote on April 5.

Journalists and politicians attending a March 13 debate hosted by IWPR in the capital Kabul claimed that despite two months of campaigning, many of the remaining candidates - eight as of March 26 - had made no attempt to win support or stand out from their rivals by setting out a vision for Afghanistan's future.

Instead, candidates had opted to fight the election purely along ethnic lines. This tactic had given rise to a campaign devoid of initiatives and promises, so that voters were unable to distinguish between one candidate's policies and the next.

"Most of them don't have programmes, and those who do take a very similar view to their rivals," Ahmad Farhad Majidi, a member of parliament, told the audience. "I believe the policies we have heard are ineffectual. The candidates don't seem to have the capacity to formulate programmes; they are seeking election through other channels."

The IWPR debate was held at the privately-run Ibn Sina Institute of Higher Education in Kabul. Guest panellists included Latif Nazari, a lecturer at Khatamun Nabiyyin University, and Shah Hussain Mortazawi, a journalist from Kabul.

Students attending the event heard that political analysts generally agreed that the presidential candidates had opted for personality over policy. Their choices of running-mates were as clear an indication as was needed that ethnic affiliation was seen as the clearest path to victory.

Zalmai Rasul, a strong presidential contender with a Pashtun background had, for example, chosen Ahmad Zia Massoud, a Tajik, as his vice-president in an effort to broaden his appeal.

And Ashraf Ghani, also a Pashtun and leading contender in the race to succeed Hamed Karzai, had adopted a similar tactic. His choice of first vice-president, Uzbek strongman Abdul Rashid Dostum, represented another prime example of the kind of coalition-building the candidates favoured. Sarwar Danish, a former justice minister of Hazara background, was Ghani's second choice.

Amina Mohseni, a student at the debate, asked panellists which of the candidates young people should consider voting for given their lack of policies.

Majidi declined to name anyone, but claimed he was optimistic that recent advances in education had left young people far better equipped to choose between candidates than they were in previous elections.

Nazari then outlined why it was so important for politicians to learn to develop specific strategies aimed at advancing Afghanistan's standing in South Asia. Presidential candidates had a duty to present and explain realistic policy initiatives as part of their campaigns, he argued.

"Candidates have to focus on their programmes rather than on ethnic, regional and factional differences," Nazari said. "Institutionalising democratic values helps create a real democratic society."

Enayatullah Omari is a student at Kabul University and an IWPR trainee.

*This report was produced as part of **Open Minds: Speaking Up, Reaching Out - Promoting University and Youth Participation in Afghan Elections**, an IWPR initiative funded by the US embassy in Kabul.*

Location: [Afghanistan](#)

Topic: [Elections](#)

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