

Afghan Youth Debates: Election Marks Clear Shift in Thinking

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Election officials and civil society activists in southern Helmand province have expressed confidence in what they say is Afghanistan's growing commitment to a more open, democratic society.

Speaking at an IWPR debate in the provincial centre Lashkar Gah on May 18, civil rights activist Mohammad Ismail Shariatyar said he believed rising educational standards had increased the average person's understanding of the need for a fair political process.

Shariatyar pointed to the continuing electoral process as proof that public opinion was now clearly swinging in favour of legitimate, accountable government.

He highlighted a particular incident that he witnessed during the April 5 polls and saw as a sign the country was moving in the right direction.

"I was observing at a polling station on election day, and witnessed a provincial council candidate bringing in 150 people from his area in a big truck so that they could vote for him," he said. "But when the votes were counted, the candidate had only secured 30 votes at this polling station.

"This goes to show that people are now making decisions for themselves – they won't be taken in by anyone."

During the debate held at Helmand University, the undergraduates who made up the audience quizzed the panellists on matters ranging from fraud and corruption to security and ethnic tensions.

Shafiullah Safi, a regional spokesman for the Independent Election Commission (IEC), said he believed his organisation was fully prepared for the second round of the presidential election, due to be held on June 14.

He told the audience that everything possible was being done to combat fraud and that the activities of the two candidates – Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai – would be closely monitored to ensure that they obeyed the election rules.

"The IEC assures all Afghans that we are 99 per cent certain that no fraud will be committed during the run-off, particularly in Helmand province," he said.

Mohammad Wais Samimi, deputy security chief for Helmand, agreed, insisting that no one would be allowed to disrupt the electoral process.

"Our police have now been well trained," he said in remarks via video link during the debate. "They know their responsibilities to the public and they know how to treat voters. Our goal is to ensure good security during the elections, and we are committed to our promises."

But Qudus Khan, regional head of the Bakhtar news agency, warned the audience that it was unrealistic to claim that the vote would be entirely free of fraud.

"It's impossible to say that no fraud will take place," he said. "There's no country in the world that doesn't experience fraud during elections. We should, however, try to keep the level of fraud low."

Abdul Wali Paizhand is a student at Helmand University and an IWPR trainee.

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