

Afghan Youth Debates: Female Turnout Could Fall in Election Rerun

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Women in the southeastern province of Ghazni are divided on how critical a role female voters are likely to play in the second round of Afghanistan's presidential vote.

At an IWPR debate in Ghazni city on May 17, local leaders and civil society activists clashed over the question of whether ambivalence and apathy had set in among those who supported the initial April 5 poll with such enthusiasm.

Hamida Gulestani, a member of the provincial council in Ghazni, said she believed the start of the Taliban's spring offensive would inevitably lead to concerns about security – potentially deterring both women and men from heading to the polls on June 14.

However, Khatera Sultani, a civil society activist, said awareness of the importance of the vote was now so strong among women that they were prepared to risk their lives again to take part.

"I believe women will participate in the second round with the same enthusiasm as the first, even if it means sacrificing their lives," Sultani told the debate. "There has been a big increase in the level of women's awareness about the election process and its importance. Women now have faith in the Afghan security forces – and the weather will be better than it was in the first round."

The timing of the presidential run-off between former ministers Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai has suffered significant delays since the first round of voting took place more than six weeks ago.

Allegations of fraud, as well as the sheer scale of ensuring the right infrastructure is in place to allow millions of Afghans to take part, has stretched the country's resources to breaking point.

Some analysts fear that a second round, at a time of year when the anti-government insurgency is traditionally at its peak, is irresponsible. Others claim that failure to conduct a transparent election with results that are accepted as legitimate by the broad majority of Afghans risks creating further instability.

Gulestani told the debate, "Unfortunately, based on the information we have from different parts of Ghazni, we believe that women will take part in the second round in smaller numbers. This is because of the security situation, as well as continuing concerns about fraud and the delays seen in the announcement of polling results so far."

The IWPR debate took place at the provincial offices of the ministry of information and culture. Guest panellists included Shukira Wali, director of Ghazni's department for women's affairs, and Fauzia Kakar, head of the same department's legal affairs division.

"Women in our country face many problems," Wali told students. "First, security may not be better in the second round than it was in the first. Second, women don't have a strong grasp of political matters and they still have to obey men's orders [about who to vote for]. I think the female presence in the second round in Ghazni will be weaker."

Kakar was more optimistic, saying, "Women have secured many gains over the past 13 years, particularly in the field of education. They will participate in the second round in order to hold on to these achievements and opportunities. No challenges will stop them from voting."

Gulestani agreed, saying, "The people of Afghanistan, especially women, must not wait for divine forces or even America to solve their problems. Women must face up to the challenges themselves."

Abdullah Lami is a student at Ghazni 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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