

Afghan Youth Debates: Most But Not All Polling Stations "Secure"

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The senior Afghan police officer in charge of security for next April's elections has promised effective measures to prevent insurgent violence from derailing the vote.

But General Mohammad Salem Ehsas, head of the Election Security Commission, acknowledged that a few parts of the country remained outside government control.

Afghanistan will hold both presidential and provincial elections on April 5, and a transparent, peaceful ballot is seen as critical to a smooth transition of power as President Hamed Karzai steps down. Significant levels of violence, or evidence of ballot-rigging, would open the way to greater instability.

General Ehsas was addressing an audience of students attending an IWPR-backed debate at Bakhtar University in Kabul on December 2.

He said election staff would be able to travel safely to and from work, while ballot boxes would be carefully monitored while being taken to be counted so as to prevent tampering.

"We are confident we can provide good security for the coming elections," General Ehsas said. "We will secure the routes along which ballot boxes are transported, and the safety of election staff as they travel to work."

While Ehsas said around 6,850 polling stations across Afghanistan had been "secured", he acknowledged that 260 others were located in Taliban-held areas.

"There are four districts that aren't under government control - Dishu and Baghran in Helmand province, Nawa in Ghazni province, and Khak-e Afghan in Zabul," he said. "Afghan security forces including the army, the police and the national security service plan to launch operations in these areas to secure these sites and activate [polling stations there]. We have already begun operations in some areas, and we will do so in others through the winter."

Saleh Mohammad Saleh, a member of parliament, addressed the university debate to underline the need for people to use their votes.

He acknowledged that poor governance and violence had reduced popular confidence in the democratic process, but insisted that this was still the only way forward.

"There is a degree of mistrust given that the government has failed to meet people's needs in the past. Some lost feet or hands [in Taliban attacks] because of elections - and to what end?" he said. "The only sustainable way forward for Afghanistan is to go and vote in the elections. There is no alternative. We must go to the ballot box even if it costs us our feet and hands."

Jamshid, studying law and politics at Bakhtar University, voiced concern about what would happen once NATO-led forces withdraw from Afghanistan over the course of 2014. He said security was the principal concern among ordinary Afghans.

General Ehsas replied by repeating that the national security forces had the capability and resources to prevent Afghanistan from falling back into Taliban control.

Mohammad Faisal Nawid is a student at Kabul University.

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