

## **Afghan Youth Debates: Poll Security Remains Paramount**

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A provincial council candidate in Afghanistan's forthcoming election has accused the government of failing to address security issues in Ghazni province.

Dad Mohammad Shadab claimed that threats of violence from criminals and insurgent groups had been a key concern for many years, yet the lives of villagers in remote districts were still at risk.

With the April presidential and provincial elections fast approaching, he questioned how officials were able to confidently assert that insurgents would be unable to disrupt the crucial ballot.

Ghazni witnessed a number of rocket attacks during the 2009 election, he stressed, and many people believed the security situation in the province was now worse.

"Election security has three dimensions," Shadab told Mohammad Eshaq Jalili, spokesman for Ghazni province's police headquarters and a panelist in the debate. "These are security before the election, security on election day itself, and security after the election.

"The government has failed to make districts in Ghazni safe for a long time now. Given that the April election is so close, how can you assure voters they have nothing to fear by taking part?"

Jalili responded by urging members of the public to cooperate with the security forces. Counter-insurgency operations were continuing, he said, and recent "mopping up" exercises targeting criminal activity had also proved effective.

"We are trying to improve the situation as we approach the elections," he said. "But God only knows what will happen in the future. People need to cooperate fully with the security forces."

Jalili was speaking at a debate which IWPR held at Ghazni University on December 11. Other speakers at the event included Mohammad Sharifi, a civil society activist, and Abdul Jami Jami, acting chairman of the provincial council in Ghazni.

A number of panellists argued that security in the province was improving and that voters should not be dissuaded from taking part in the election by safety fears.

"We cannot compare the upcoming elections with previous votes," Sharifi said. "I'm confident our security forces will ensure better security this time. We've witnessed a far stronger voter registration process in the province during this election. Thousands have obtained voting cards in remote districts without any problems, and for this reason we are optimistic that people here will vote in an atmosphere of peace and security."

Jami said that delivering "100 per cent security" for the April 5 poll was difficult. Recent presidential elections in other countries showed how problematic it could be to contain violence, even in more stable states.

"No one can guarantee 100 per cent security, even in countries more powerful than Afghanistan," he said. "We witnessed bombs going off during Pakistan's recent election and you'll remember that Iran also experienced security problems.

"Even Shahr-e Naw in Kabul city, an area that is very safe, may witness explosions on election day. However, I'm confident that our police, national army and national security agency have gained a great deal of experience over the last ten years. I hope everything will be under control on the election day."

Students at the debate also raised fears about the potential for police and government officials to interfere in the election process. Public figures were known to have been involved in efforts to corrupt the vote five years ago, they said.

In reply, Jalili said, "The issue of interference by police and other powerful individuals in previous elections is true, and we ask security forces and government officials to try to prevent this. Members of the public need to be confident that police will not interfere in the voting process. If people witnesses instances of fraud they must inform us. No one must be forced to vote for a candidate whom the police favour."

**Mohammadullah Maku is a student at Ghazni University and an IWPR trainee.**

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