

Afghan Youth Debates: Students Analyse Electoral Laws

Author: [Abdullah Lami](#)

Panellists at an IWPR debate have outlined Afghanistan's electoral law to more than 100 students from Ghazni University.

Reporters and newspaper editors highlighted specific legislation and took questions from audience members.

Hoshang Hamdard, a civil society activist, described how the Independent Election Commission (IEC), the official body overseeing the vote, had restricted candidates' spending on their campaigns. Other regulations cover the locations of campaign advertising and ban the use of government resources by candidates.

"Presidential candidates cannot spend more than 175,000 [US] dollars on their campaigns and provincial council candidates can't spend more than 8,700 dollars," Hamdard told the audience.

"Candidates must also refuse to accept foreign contributions, inform the IEC who their funding sources are, and abide by regulations stipulating where they can put up election posters. These are red lines, and if candidates cross them they will have committed an offence."

The IWPR debate took place on February 13 in Ghazni province in southern Afghanistan.

Nadira, a student, asked what rules were in place to allow IEC staff to monitor candidate expenditure effectively.

Hussein Rahimi, a local reporter, admitted that this would be a difficult task.

"Unfortunately, the banking standards in Afghanistan make it difficult to monitor election expenses of candidates with any degree of accuracy," he said.

Saleha Musawi, another student, expressed concern that warlords and other "irresponsible individuals" would seek to corrupt the vote as they had done in 2009.

"I believe this will happen again," she said. "How can this kind of interference be prevented?"

Abdul Ali Fakuri, editor-in-chief of the Sanai newspaper in Ghazni, said the current president, Hamed Karzai, had issued a binding decree outlawing election fraud, and any breach of this could lead to prosecution.

In response to comments about the amount of time allotted for campaigning – two months for presidential hopefuls and one for provincial council candidates – Hamdard said, "This is sufficient time. If presidential candidates have their programmes and policies already planned out and developed, then two months is enough. If they don't have programmes in place or fail to explain them properly, this will show them up as weak candidates."

Yasar, a student, asked how candidates could be expected to conduct effective campaigns since this was a time of year when Afghanistan's roads were often blocked by snowfall.

Fakuri admitted that the weather could make life difficult, adding, "The only way for candidates to campaign in mountainous areas is through the media."

Abdullah Lami is a student at Ghazni University and an IWPR trainee.

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