

Afghans Call for Electoral Improvements

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Voters say they need reassurance that the process will be transparent.

Work is urgently needed to improve the electoral system ahead of the upcoming parliamentary election, according to speakers at recent IWPR debates.

According to the Afghan constitution, elections should be held between 30 and 60 days before the end of any given parliamentary term. The current legislature's five-year mandate expired on June 22, and President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani has issued a decree to extend the parliamentary term until such time as the ballot can be held.

Experts in debates organised by IWPR in Zabul, Paktia and Logar provinces in August said the Electoral Reform Commission (ERC) needed to step up its efforts to restructure the voting system.

Mohammad Kazem Ibrahimzada, head of the provincial department for youth affairs in Logar, south of Kabul, told the debate that the current government had set up the ERC to increase the transparency of the electoral process.

The ERC has been carrying out public consultations regarding comprehensive changes to the election process.

"A number of competent individuals have been appointed to the ERC," said Mohammad Ibrahim Ebrat, the head of the Surghar civil society association in the southern Zabul province. "If they work honestly, then hopefully the electoral system can be reformed."

Ahmad Khalid Safi, adviser to the provincial governor of Zabul, said that the ERC had the powers to make changes.

"One reason for creating the commission was to reform electoral mechanisms and respond to concerns that have made people distrust the voting process," he said.

Shafiullah Mohammadi, a trainer with the Free and Fair Elections Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA) in Zabul, emphasised that reforms were necessary to avoid the widespread accusations of fraud that dogged previous elections.

Civil society activist Shafiullah Afghanzai said that the introduction of electronic ID cards could help this process.

"Public distrust of the electoral system is increasing, but if the process of introducing electronic ID cards is speeded up and they are properly distributed, this problem will be largely solved," Afghanzai said.

Shir Ali Faizi, head of public awareness at the Independent Election Commission (IEC) in Paktia in the southeast, said that the ERC could only produce recommendations and it was the government that ultimately had to take responsibility for implementing reforms.

FEFA's head in Paktia, Ehsanullah Hamidi, said the ERC's 14 commissioners must not be above scrutiny themselves, while civil society activist Lemar Niazi warned that any solutions it recommended might not be lasting.

Meanwhile, provincial council member Janat Khan Samkani said there was no need for reforms in the first place. He said that the current system was perfectly acceptable, but had been undermined by corruption within the IEC.

*This report is based on an ongoing series of debates conducted as part of IWPR's **Afghan Youth and Elections** programme.*

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