

## **Afghans Impatient for Electoral Reform**

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Overdue polls cannot take place until changes are made to the voting system.

Afghanistan needs international help to fund and implement reforms to facilitate the holding of a long-delayed parliamentary election, according to speakers at recent IWPR debates.

The Afghan constitution mandates that 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 new elections can be held. (See also **Afghans Angry at Election Delay**.)

Tadamichi Yamamoto, the United Nations' deputy special representative in Afghanistan, said in Kabul last month that continued UN financial and technical assistance for elections depended on fundamental reforms being made to the country's voting system.

At events which IWPR organised last month in Zabul, Khost and Nangarhar provinces, local officials, civil society activists and political analysts discussed the barriers that still remained to holding an election.

Writer and journalist Mohammad Asef Shinwari told the Nangarhar debate that Kabul needed to prioritise electoral reforms in order to guarantee support from foreign donors.

"Unless the current problems in the electoral system are resolved and the national unity government wins the trust of the international community, the world will not pay for the costs of our election," he said.

However, speakers in Khost said that it was the Afghan government's responsibility to fund the election budget.

Jamaluddin, the director of human resources at Khost's finance department, said that the government was still struggling to recover from 2014's protracted, two-round presidential election.

That election was marred by claims of fraud, and a total nationwide recount delayed a result until – following mediation by US Secretary of State John Kerry – Mohammad Ashraf Ghani was finally inaugurated on September 29.

"Most of last year was spent in electoral controversies," Jamaluddin continued. "We had no revenue. The budget of the ministry of finance faced a multi-million dollar deficit. As a result, no budget has been provided for the elections."

Nur Shah Nurani, a member of the provincial council, said that a commission had begun working on reforms to the electoral system. This would help build trust, he added.

"International donor agencies have promised that they will provide between 60 to 80 million dollars in aid for the parliamentary election, provided that electoral reforms are implemented and that they are confident that the election will be held in a proper fashion," Nurani concluded.

Sahebuddin Zadran, head of public awareness at the Independent Election Commission (IEC) in Khost, said that his organisation was ready to carry out its election duties if funds were made available.

He said that reforms would be ready for implementation in about three months, and that the international community would then help fund the polls.

Bismillah, the IEC's head of public awareness in Zabul province, also told participants that his organisation was yet to receive the funds needed for them to play their part in parliamentary elections.

"The reason is the controversy surrounding the previous presidential election, a number of political considerations and the current security situation in the country," he added.

Civil society activist Shabnam Fazli asked the panel how funds allocated by the international community would be spent on the elections.

Bismillah explained that the commission needed money to run public awareness campaigns, print ballot cards, pay staff salaries and provide other logistical supplies.

Shafiullah Mohammadi, representing the Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA) in Zabul, said, "Although the government should be the main source of an electoral budget, our government is

unable to deliver. Therefore, the international community and other partner countries now need to help fund the election budget.”

A tribal elder in Zabul, Abdul Wali Wali, said that accountability was key to the success of future polls.

“Our elders, officials and civil society organisations need to be able to assure the world that the election will be held transparently to enable them to obtain the election budget from the international community,” he said.

Sediqa Jalali, the head of the women’s affairs department in Zabul, said that public mistrust would grow as long as the polls continued to be postponed.

“Delaying the parliamentary election is detrimental for the country,” she said. “Controversy will grow for as long as the election is postponed.”

*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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