

Afghans Praise Electoral Reform Plan

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Popular support for a changes intended to make the system more democratic.

An 11-point plan drawn up by Afghanistan's Electoral Reform Commission (ERC) to improve future elections has won praise from participants at a series of IWPR debates.

The government set up the ERC earlier this year to restructure the voting system ahead of a long-delayed parliamentary election.

The current legislature's five-year mandate expired on June 22, and President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani issued a decree to extend its term until such time as the ballot can be held.

Events in Uruzgan, Kunar, Kandahar and Paktika provinces last month focused on ERC suggestions to prevent the widespread fraud seen in previous national elections. These include the introduction of electronic ID cards, improved access for women, and systems to ensure that candidates are qualified to do the job.

In Uruzgan in south-central Afghanistan, provincial council member Abdul Karim Khadimzai praised the commission's plan.

"If the government approves it, this could help bring transparency to the electoral process," he said.

Writer and journalist Najibullah Latif said, "I've read the 11-point plan prepared by the ERC, which stresses that electronic ID cards should be distributed prior to elections."

At the moment, he said, it was easy to obtain more than one voting card.

Abdul Jalil, the head of outreach in Uruzgan for the Independent Election Commission (IEC), the body that runs elections, said his organisation backed the reform commission's suggestions.

"If the solutions that the ECR has proposed to the president are implemented, future elections may be better," he said.

Participants in a debate in the eastern province of Kunar were also optimistic. Journalist and civil society activist Khaibar Dagar expressed hope that the proposed changes would improve the calibre of Afghan lawmakers.

"In the future, the warlords will not be able to deploy their power so easily to select their own candidates because the ERC has called for a higher education qualification as a prerequisite for anyone who wants to run for parliament. That's good news."

"I agree that members of parliament should have higher education qualifications, because the legislature makes very important decisions that affect the whole nation," he added.

Sayed Zewarshah Sadat, the local government chief in Kunar's Nurgal district, said Afghans were becoming more aware of the risk of electoral fraud, and hence more demanding too.

"If the international observers had monitored the election commission properly and provided useful advice, we wouldn't have had these problems in the past, either," he added.

When an audience member questioned the ERC's legitimacy, Sadat said the question itself showed how far Afghanistan had progressed.

"We need to realise that 14 years ago, we had no system and no resources with which to build a functional

government,” he said. “People didn’t have opportunities to sit and question their district government heads.

“Now we believe that voting can really make a difference to our future.”

In Kandahar in the south, former provincial councillor Farida Ahmadi told the debate that electronic IDs could boost female participation in politics.

“Women have problems voting in Kandahar, and fraud [further] violates their rights. To stop this, distributing electronic ID cards is a priority,” she said.

Farid Ahmad Zafar, a civil society activist who heads a youth association in Kandahar, said that if electoral reform was to be successful, it would need a firm hand and international support.

“Reforms need the strong will of the leaders of the national unity government, as well as of the United States and the international community,” he said.

Zafar noted that after foreign governments threatened to withdraw funding unless action was taken on electoral corruption, “the Afghan government was then obliged to discuss reforms immediately”.

The head of the women’s affairs department in Kandahar, Ruqia Achakzai, said she feared that any reforms would only be for show.

“Laws are made for all manner of things in this country, but nothing is implemented,” she said.

Abdurrahim, the IEC’s head in Kandahar, said security problems remained a major obstacle to fair elections.

“It doesn’t matter how many reforms are implemented by the electoral commission, nor even whether electronic IDs are distributed,” he said. “If security isn’t guaranteed, problems with fraud will not just persist, they will actually increase.”

Participants in the debate held in Paktika, a southeastern province, said that however positive the reforms might be, there would be no time to put them in place before the parliamentary election.

Mohammadullah Hematyar, a civil society activist, identified what he saw as key elements of the plan, such as issuing electronic IDs, hiring women to work in electoral commissions, and ensuring that only educated candidates got through. But he noted that these things would take a long time to put in place

“There are things in the reform plan that could ensure electoral transparency, but making them happen before the next parliamentary election is going to be impossible,” he said.

Provincial council member Abdulmobin Faqirzada said the only way of getting round this was to delay the ballot even further.

*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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