

Afghans Review President's Early Days

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While supporters note foreign policy achievements, critics want to see faster change at home.

The failure of Afghan president Mohammad Ashraf Ghani to form a cabinet during his first 100 days in office was one of the main gripes raised during a series of debates organised by IWPR across the country.

Ghani, who was inaugurated at the end of September after an electoral process lasting six months, won some praise for early wins such as signing a landmark security pact with the United States and addressing a major corruption scandal surrounding Kabul Bank.

But many participants believed the delay in forming a government created unnecessary instability.

A protracted dispute over electoral fraud claims was resolved by giving Ghani's rival Abdullah Abdullah the new post of "chief executive officer", akin to prime minister.

During one IWPR debate in Aybak, the provincial centre of Samangan province, participants said this power-sharing agreement was obstructing the process of government. Both Ghani and Abdullah have the authority to appoint ministers, and they have different constituencies to consider.

"The followers of Mohammad Ashraf Ghani and Dr Abdullah Abdullah, the chief executive, expect different things from each of them," said Ghulam Nabi, who was deputy head of the president's campaign team in Samangan ahead of the election.

In a debate Helmand province, freelance reporter Farid Ahmad said he believed Ghani's choice of appointees was too influenced by emotion. The decision to appoint some ministers and provincial governors on an acting basis has made things more difficult, Ahmad.

Jamila Niazi, head of the women's affairs department in Helmand, agreed that this was a major problem.

"When the acting governor and minister have no authority, how can they drive the work forward properly?" she asked.

Suhaila Waziri, who worked for Ghani's campaign team in the province, said the cabinet delay meant that "all the hopes that Helmand people had invested in the new government were dashed".

Meanwhile, violence continued unabated – "Killings, assassinations and the burning down of schools are still making headline news in the province," Waziri said.

In campaigning, Ghani promised an ambitious and wide-ranging plan of action for his first 100 days in office, to tackle issues like institutional corruption, unemployment, poverty and security.

Many felt let down by the lack of progress.

In Qala-ye Nau, the main town of Badghis province, debate participant Mohayuddin asked panelists what the new president had had done to improve the economic situation there.

Bahaudin Qadesi, chairman of the provincial council, said that the only decision likely to benefit people in Badghis was an order to accelerate work on a road being built between Herat and Faryab which will pass through the province.

Sharafuddin Majidi, representing the governor of Badghis province, told the debate that it was far too early to judge Ghani on his promises, since he had inherited the legacy of more than 35 years of conflict, and things could not be turned round immediately.

In Kapisa, journalist Mohammad Zaker Erfanyar agreed that 100 days was far too short a time on which to judge a government's performance.

The president's record was described in more positive terms in the eastern Kunar province, where freelance journalist Shoaib Gharwal called for a better appreciation of Ghani's achievements to date.

Gharwal, who worked for the Ghani campaign last year, pointed to the security handover from NATO to Afghan forces, the closure of the Bagram detention centre and the release of Afghan inmates from Guantanamo. Then there were economic agreements with Pakistan and the president's trip to China.

By contrast, in Ghazni province, an audience member leapt to his feet to denounce the president.

In a debate held in Moqor district, Mohammad Isa said he could not listen to talk of Ghani's achievements when people in his own area were suffering so much.

"Come and ask how much people's lives and economic position have deteriorated since the new president came in," he said. "There is war and death in our area every day. We have no district governor, no court and no judge. We don't have an attorney [prosecutor]. In short, we are yet to see anything positive from this president."

When IWPR asked presidential spokesman Nazifullah Salarzai to comment on the views expressed during these debates, he acknowledged that people had become impatient, but stressed that three months was far too short a time to implement Ghani's programme.

Salarzai pointed to the security agreement with Washington, the resolution of the Kabul Bank case, and the president's highly effective foreign trips as major achievements.

He said the delay in forming a cabinet was due to the president's efforts to ensure the best-qualified people were picked.

"The public should be patient and assist and cooperate with the government in order to solve our problems," he added.

*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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