

Capturing Votes in Western Afghanistan

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Voters in Ghor province say they are being intimidated into pledging support for candidates backed by local strongmen.

Shivering with cold under her flower-patterned veil, Taban stood in a long line to receive her voting card in Chaghcharan, a town in western Afghanistan.

The 70-year-old was among a group of women who had been bused into Chaghcharan, the provincial centre of Ghor province, on a cold winter's day to collect documents entitling them to vote in the April presidential and provincial elections.

Some of the women in the queue feared they would not be allowed to exercise their right to vote freely. The buses that took them to Chaghcharan had been laid on by local paramilitary groups, they said.

One of the women in the queue, Gul Arus, complained that she would have to surrender her ballot to local strongmen who would make the choice for her.

"I wish I could vote for someone good who would bring security and prevent acts of cruelty, but the community I live in won't allow me to do that. Powerful armed men are deciding our destiny," Gul Arus said. "They say, 'Whoever we suggest, you should vote for that specific person, otherwise you will face severe consequences.'"

Local officials and rights groups are alarmed by the level of intimidation and coercion in Ghor, which they say will mean the April 5 presidential and provincial elections are fundamentally flawed.

Residents of Ghor province say armed gangs are collecting the voting cards of local people and making photocopies. These copies are then delivered to candidates with the promise that these votes will be cast in their favour on election day. The owners of voting cards have been threatened with violence if they do not comply.

Amir Mohammad, 25, a resident of Ghor's Shahrak district, described how the coercion worked.

"The local commanders collected copies of our voting cards and made threats to get us to vote for their candidates. They warned us that if we voted for other candidates, they would track us down using the copies of the cards, and they would harm us and our families," he said.

Gul Khan, from the Dulayna district, added, "The local commanders and leaders know who's eligible to vote. If people refuse to obtain their cards, or to vote for their particular candidates, they'll be killed."

Abdul Habib Azizi, public outreach officer of the Independent Election Commission (IEC) for the province, confirmed that local strongmen had been collecting voting cards.

Azizi was unable to say how many women were likely to be forced to cast their votes to order, but he noted that male voters, too, were being pressured by armed groups.

He noted that more than 32,000 women had collected their voting cards so far. This meant that women made up 40 per cent of the total number of eligible voters who had done so.

Azizi said the IEC would refuse to open polling stations in areas controlled by armed groups unless government forces could provide security there.

"There are 281 polling sites within Ghor province and more than 50 of them face direct security threats," Azizi said, singling out six of the region's ten districts – Shahrak, Dulayna, Pasawand, Dawlatyar, Charsada and parts of Chaghcharan.

The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) also confirms that warlords in Ghor are issuing threats against anyone who does not vote for their preferred candidate.

"We are concerned about the situation," Jawad Rezai, the AIHRC's head in Ghor, told IWPR. "Most of these strongmen have the support of members of parliament from Ghor as well as government ministers, and that's why local officials can't do anything to resolve the problems."

The armed groups causing the trouble are not the Taliban, which oppose the elections altogether and simply want to derail them, not fix the results. Instead, they are the remnants of various militia factions that operated through the 1990s, fighting each other and the Taliban. In post-2001 Afghanistan, they were

subject to a concerted programme of disarmament and demobilisation, and the factions which they once served either dissolved or turned into political parties. But “illegal armed units”, as they are termed, still exist in many areas. (See **Ghor Warlords Accused of Abusing Women**.)

IWPR understands that in some cases, voting cards are being gathered on behalf of specific candidates. Some groups identify themselves with presidential candidates including Abdullah Abdullah and Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, or with the latter’s running-mate Ismail Khan. The more mercenary paramilitary commanders are simply offering ready votes to the highest bidder.

Mohammad Hassan Hakimi, a civil society activist in Ghor, said paramilitary groups had been busy securing voting cards ever since the final list of presidential candidates was announced late last year.

He claimed that some candidates had themselves begun openly canvassing for votes well before they were legally allowed to do so. Official campaigning is allowed from February 2 for presidential candidates, and from March 4 for the provincial elections.

“One vice-president invited influential people from Ghor province to fly to Herat so he could talk to them about the coming elections and use them later on,” Hakimi said, arguing that such premature electioneering would cast a shadow over the transparency of the process.

Sayed Wahid Qatali, chairman of the provincial council for Herat, due west of Ghor, said the activity of armed groups in the neighbouring province posed a major threat to the elections.

“Certain leaders, government ministers and people of influence have developed close relationships with these strongmen so as to use their support one day,” he said. “That day is now coming.”

Herat governor Sayed Fazlullah Wahidi confirmed that campaigning was already taking place for both the presidential and provincial races in his province. He warned that if it carried on, candidates would find their campaign offices shut down.

In Ghor, provincial security chief Delawar Shah Delawari insisted that the Afghan police force would not allow anyone to fix the ballot in favour of specific candidates.

“We know that powerful individuals will try to direct peoples’ votes, but we will not allow them to achieve that,” he said.

Locals residents have little faith in such promises.

“In past elections, the strongmen stood behind the ballot boxes to force people to vote for their candidate. Although there were police in the area, they were afraid to say anything to them,” said one resident of Akhta Khana Sufla, a village in Chaghcharan district, who asked to remain anonymous, said. “This will happen again and the police won’t be able to stop these powerful people.”

Gul Khan agreed that there was no one to stand up to the paramilitaries.

“People here are being treated like sheep. They are held hostage by these butchers,” he said. “There is no rule of law here. Every out-of-control armed commander rules according to his own private interests. They consider themselves law, lawyer and judge. The police can’t fight against these powerful people. We have lost all hope.”

Voters like Gul Arus now face an impossible dilemma. “If I follow the wishes of strongmen and warlords and vote for some brute, I will feel guilty, as if I’ve been party to a crime. But I have no option but to go and vote,” she said.

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