

Confusion Over Afghan Leadership

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Survey reveals that many believe the president to be a king.

While some voters ponder their choice of 18 candidates for the presidential election on October 9, others don't really know what a president is, according to a recent IWPR survey.

Many confused a president with a king, which should come as no surprise since the country was ruled by a monarch for much of the past 300 years. People often use the word "pacha", or king, when asked what qualities are needed for a good president.

"I don't know the president," said a 55-year-old man in the Imam Sahib district of Basoos village, Kunduz province. "I only know the king, and I want my rights [to be granted] from him."

The views were obtained in a nationwide survey of 3,000 people in 21 provinces - conducted in mid-August by 100 journalists, as part of a workshop organised by IWPR on journalism and the presidential election.

Under Afghanistan's new constitution, approved by the Loya Jirga in January, the president is the head of state and is directly elected by the people. His powers are held in check by the national assembly - scheduled to be elected next year - and the courts.

The president will serve a five-year term in office and may be re-elected only once.

But some are not aware of these constitutional provisions.

Even the concept of king is subject to different interpretations.

Mohammed Alam Badli, 60, a tribal leader, from Khugiani district, Nengarhar province, offered a definition of a king that could suit a president as well.

"Countries are like pots, and kings are the lids," he said. "On the pots that don't have lids, flies and mosquitoes will enter. But the pots that have lids will be clean and tidy and safe."

Some see the monarch as the representative of God and his prophet; while others believe the king to be the "shadow of God", a phrase often used in Islamic prayers.

And there are those who view the monarch as a patriarchal figure. A 20-year-old resident of Nengrage village, Nur Gram district, considered a good king to be like a father. Another citizen of the same village preferred to see him as the head of the household.

Part of the reason people cling to the idea of a king may be that the country's brief experience with presidents has not been positive.

Indeed, since the fall of the Taleban, many citizens have clamoured for the return of King Zahir, who reigned from 1933 to 1973.

Two women from Kabul said they don't have any interest in electing a president or in his activities.

"All presidents have taken their exams, and they have failed. I don't care about any one of them," said one of the women, aged 39.

Her friend, a 32-year-old, agreed as she waited her turn in a line at a bakery. "So far, as I have seen, all the presidents of Afghanistan are robbers," she said.

Ajmal Fazli, 26, from Kandigul village, Kunar province, was equally dismissive of presidents and kings, saying they only take care of their relatives, giving them jobs and money, even if they have no ability or experience. "The king is the one who makes his folks full and rich," he said.

One president who some citizens remember favourably was Daod Khan, who held office from 1973 to 1978. People say he had constructive plans for the country. The next president "should model himself after Daod Khan", said a 65-year-old man in Herat's sixth district.

Some of those interviewed were very clear of the sort of qualities a president should have.

A 60-year-old woman from of Torkham, Nengarhar province, said she considered a president someone who pays attention to the needs of the people, "The president must be alert, and work for city and village the same."

Mahmood Taher Watanyar, 50, from Chumbili village, in Sauki district, Kunar province, said he believes "a president must be brave and bold and ...have the ability to represent the nation. Because brave ones are considered the symbols of a bold nation".

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