

## **Debates Bring Afghan Public and Officials Together**

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Events are opportunities for ordinary people to come face to face with their political representatives.

A series of IWPR-organised debates across Afghanistan has brought together provincial officials and local residents, in some cases for the first time.

The events, held in a number of provinces as part of IWPR's ongoing **Youth and Elections** project, designed to encourage young people to exercise their right to vote by providing them with the information they need, and a chance to put questions to politicians and officials.

Haji Faizullah, a participant in one debate held in the Zheray district of Kandahar province in the south, said people there had never had a the chance to quiz state representatives before.

"Thanks to the IWPR debate, we were able to meet and get to know the members of our provincial council and the district governor. They have been in power a long time, but we had yet to see them. We hope the debates will help establish a relationship between us, and that officials will learn about the situation we're in," Faizullah said.

Qari Wahedullah Bakhtyar, who also took part in the Kandahar debate, added, "If this series of debates continues, I am confident that our young people will not be misled by the [Taleban] enemy's propaganda."

Participants said events like this were an effective way to involve ordinary people in the political process.

"These debates strengthen the relationship between the people and the state," Abdul Ghani, a member of the development council in Paktika province in southeast Afghanistan, said. "Members of the public are informed of the state's projects, and the state in turn feels a responsibility to respond to their concerns."

"People can discuss their problems face to face with officials in these debates, and the officials have to explain how they can solve their problems, and have to promise to do so," added Jamaluddin, a student at Paktika university. "These debates can be the key to resolving problems between the people and the government."

The remit of district councils was discussed at debates in Kandahar, Laghman, Logar and Paktika provinces. By law, each district is supposed to have an elected council, but these have yet to be set up.

"Article seven of the electoral law says that every district has to have a council. Why have the councils not been created for the past 13 years?" asked Mohammad Naser Ghairat, a member of the provincial council in Logar.

Emranullah Khanjar, a university lecturer in Laghman, said, "Afghanistan is a country that lacks security. Only district councils can address people's problems in unsafe areas. There is no other solution."

Meanwhile, access to information was discussed in debates held in Kabul, Badghis, Balkh and Baghlan provinces.

"We not only lack access to information in Moqor district, we lack access to anything at all," Mohammad Ibrahim, a resident of Badghis, said. "Government officials won't grant young people the right to take part in meetings and gatherings, while providing access to information is just out of the question."

Ghulam Ali Elmi, who took part in the same event, blamed systemic corruption for encouraging officials to withhold information from the public. "This deprives members of the public of their rights," he said.

Elsewhere, other topics discussed included the role of women's shelters in Kapisa, Nimroz, Kunduz and Faryab provinces. (See **Safe Houses for Afghan Women** .)

Complaints about the long-delayed introduction of electronic ID cards were heard at the debates in Zabul, Kunar, Nangarhar and Khost provinces, and formed the basis for an inter-province video debate between Nangarhar and Paktika on February 11. (See **Afghans Impatient for New ID Cards** .)

Khalid Ahmad Abdiani, a member of the Independent Election Commission (IEC), emphasised that electronic ID cards would vastly improve the transparency of upcoming elections.

Asadullah Dawlatzai of the census office in Nangarhar took part in the video discussion and said the new ID cards were essential to ensuring fair elections.

“Such debates put pressure on government officials to attend to their responsibilities,” he said.

On February 22, an IWPR discussion on voter participation in the forthcoming parliamentary election was broadcast live on Paktia’s local Zhwandai Radio.

Allah Mir Bahramzoi, a member of Paktia provincial council, said the discussion was “an effective step at a sensitive time”, and called for similar programmes covering parts of the country where people were short of information.”

*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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**Topic:** Accountability  
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