

Pashtun Candidates Protest in Herat

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With final election results released, unsuccessful contenders from Pashtun group say they were systematically excluded.

Following the release of final results from Afghanistan's September parliamentary election, Pashtun parliamentary candidates from Herat province claimed they were excluded by fraud and intimidation.

Although roughly half the population of this western province is thought to be Pashtun, only one candidate from this ethnic group won a seat in parliament.

Unsuccessful Pashtun candidates staged an angry demonstration outside the provincial governor's office on November 30, six days after the definitive election results were announced.

One of them, Alhaj Gholam Qader Akbar, accused Ismail Khan, former governor of Herat and now water and energy minister in Kabul, of backing attempts to sideline Pashtuns.

"A specific group, that of Ismail Khan, tried to prevent candidates from the Pashtun ethnic group from getting into parliament," Akbar told the crowd through a loudspeaker. "Such actions and plans indicated that certain individuals in Herat province have declared a jihad against the Pashtuns."

After these outspoken remarks, some demonstrators left, saying they feared that they would run into trouble with supporters of Ismail Khan if they remained there.

Akbar later said he had surrounded his house with barbed wire and sandbags in case he was attacked.

Parliamentary hopeful Mohammad Maruf Fazli said he had been listed as a winner in early results, but was barred by the Electoral Complaints Commission, ECC, which alleged he had violated electoral procedures.

Fazli accused Ismail Khan and ECC spokesman Ahmad Zia Rafat of working to exclude Pashtuns from the final list.

"I will join the opposition [insurgents] with my men if the government does not uphold our rights," he told the crowd

Other Pashtun candidates made similar allegations of wrongdoing during the public meeting.

Out of the 153 individuals listed on the final candidate list, only one Pashtun – a woman called Yasamin Barakzai – was awarded one of the 17 seats allocated to Herat province.

Another demonstration in front of the governor's office was staged by voters from districts that have substantial Pashtun populations – Shindand, Golran, Kohsan and Pashtun Zarghun.

Some protestors set fire to their voting cards, among them Abdol Satar Alokzai, who said, "It's completely obvious that certain domestic and foreign forces are trying to increase divisions and differences among ethnic groups by removing the names of Pashtuns."

Arguing that Pashtuns had long been under attack from other Afghan political forces with foreign backing, he warned, "I think the outcome is going to be unpleasant."

The complaints of discrimination were backed by Nazir Ahmad Haidarzadah, who is head of Herat's provincial council.

"I am very concerned about the situation, which could become critical," he said. "Certain fanatical individuals and groups have tried to prevent this ethnic group being represented in parliament."

Political analyst Ahmad Sayedi warned of dire consequences if ethnic Pashtuns were not sufficiently represented in the new parliament.

He accused Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission, IEC, and the ECC of "deliberately acting in a manner that destabilises the current situation in Afghanistan".

"I foresee bloody disputes and other bad things for Afghanistan coming out of this," he added.

Ismail Khan was the powerful governor of Herat province from 2001 to 2004. According to local analyst Ahmad Ghani Khasrawi, he remains influential, and retains a lingering resentment of the Pashtun forces

that were instrumental in his removal.

Helped by a strong political and economic relationship with neighbouring Iran, Ismail Khan's administration appeared to be unshakeable in what was then a largely stable region of Afghanistan.

In early 1994, however, he faced a military challenge from a Pashtun warlord in Shindand district. Details of what happened next are obscure, but the government of President Hamid Karzai appears to have backed the challenger rather than the incumbent governor, who was dismissed and brought to Kabul to become a cabinet minister.

Ismail Khan did not respond to IWPR's numerous attempts to contact him. However, one of his former subordinates, Gholam Mohammad Masoun, ridiculed suggestions that the ex-governor had interfered in the electoral process.

"If a number of candidates can get into parliament while other can be knocked off the list on the orders of Ismail Khan, then the Independent Election Commission and ECC cannot be independent at all," he said.

Masoun said that while Ismail Khan had spoken in private about which candidates would be best for Herat, he had not backed any of them in public. Like any Afghan citizen, he had the right to say which candidate he preferred, Masoun added.

Across Afghanistan, the election process was dogged by allegations of fraud and questions about the institutions overseeing the process.

Responding to allegations by the prosecutor general's office that the September vote was marred by interference by election officials, the IEC's head Fazel Ahmad Manawi issued a strong denial, insisting that "although there was some interference by individuals, the commission did not submit to any kind of pressure, did not take linguistic, ethnic or religious matters into account, and instead made independent decisions".

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