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Legislative Newsletter

News

“Stop foreign interference in local governance” Senators demand

Executive oversight has been high on the agenda of the Meshrano Jirga (MJ) in recent weeks. On August 29, Senators questioned Mr. Ghulam Jilani Popal, head of the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG), during a general plenary session to address concerns of “foreign interference in local governance,” particularly related to appointments and dismissals. All governors and district chiefs are appointed by the IDLG.

Senators alleged that when a governor or a district chief is accused of corruption the official is not handled in the courts. Instead, they claim the official is transferred to another province with the backing of foreign countries. Speaking to fellow Senators, Dr. Zulmai Zabuli (Zabul) said, “When a governor is accused, rather than ending up in court, he is transferred to another province. IDLG should be candid in telling us if foreign countries interfere in this.” Dr. Zulmai further requested the IDLG to provide a list of provinces in which “foreign countries interfered” in the appointment of governors and district chiefs. He added, “IDLG should tell us in which provinces they [foreigners] interfere and the MJ will support you [IDLG].”

Senator Arifulah Pashtun (Khost) concurring with Dr. Zulmai, said, “The Governor of Khost province was appointed by foreigners.”

Without making explicit comments on particular individuals, Mr. Popal responded, “Some of the governors were appointed based on political considerations and connections rather than merit.” He admitted that it was a serious problem and that he was determined to change it. Mr. Popal did not specifically respond to the charge of foreign interference.

Allegations of foreign interference first hit the headlines on April 18, 2008 when Canada’s former Foreign Affairs Minister, Maxime Bernier, reportedly told President Karzai that then Kandahar Governor Asadullah Khalid should be relieved of his duties because he was a “corrupt governor”. Mr. Khalid is now currently serving as the Minister of Border and Tribal Affairs. Afghan foreign ministry objected to Mr. Bernier’s suggestion at the time. The Senators had not previously considered this issue until last week’s MJ plenary session.

Some Senators however believe that lack of education and capacity is far more problematic than “foreign interference” in local governance. “Governors, deputy governors and districts chiefs do not have higher education,” claimed Senator Ghulam Muhayyudin Munsif (Kapisa). Senator Munsif’s sentiments were shared by Senator Bismilah Afghanmal (Kandahar) who explained, “The majority of district chiefs of Kandahar are uneducated. They were appointed based on relations and recommendations by the powerful.” Mr. Popal agreed with Senators’ views that lack of higher education and illiteracy among district chiefs was a challenge to effective service delivery.

Candidates worry about lack of transparency in parliamentary elections

Parliamentary candidates have expressed concern over the lack of transparency in the lead up to the upcoming elections on September 18.

“We are concerned. Fraudulent electoral cards have been printed in Pakistan and brought to Afghanistan.” claimed Daud Kalakani, a candidate seeking re-election in Kabul province. He also cast doubt on the ability of the Afghan Independent Election Commission (IEC) to conduct transparent elections, claiming that some local members of the IEC have approached him and asked for money.

Mr. Alemi Balkhi, an incumbent MP seeking re-election in Kabul province, also expressed concerns about security issues impacting the election throughout the country. “I am worried...insecurity paves the way for fraud and vote rigging. It can also pave the way for interference by some government officials who support certain candidates,” said Mr. Balkhi in an interview with USAID Afghanistan Parliamentary Assistance Project.

On September 5, Ahmad Zia Rafat, the spokesperson for the Afghanistan’s Election Complaints Commission (ECC), announced in a press conference in Kabul that the ECC received hundreds of complaints from candidates. According to Mr. Rafat, two government ministers have been singled out and are suspected of actively campaigning for certain candidates. He also announced that complaints against a governor have already been filed and are the subject of further investigation.

Ahmad Shah Behzad, a parliamentary candidate in the Herat province, said that some government ministers and military generals actively campaigned for certain candidates in his province. “We have witnessed meetings of Cabinet ministers rallying people behind candidates of their choice. When you have the government machinery at your disposal, you can easily change the results of the elections,” claimed Mr. Behzad.

The Meshrano Jirga (MJ), the Upper House of the National Assembly has also expressed concern about the lack of transparency with the elections. On August 31, Senators invited

Fazel Ahmad Manawee, the Chairman of the IEC, to brief them on election preparations. Chairman Manawee informed the MJ that the IEC is ready for the elections albeit with a reduced number of polling centers from what they had initially planned.

Senators raised issues about voters receiving more than one identity card for the elections and allegations of the existence of fake ballot papers. Chairman Manawee stated that he had no information about fake ballot papers but said that, if it was true, the IEC would take necessary steps to prevent their use.

Legislation

No activity to report for the period.