



Legislative Newsletter

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NEWS:

Afghan Parliament Gives Ministries Failing Grade for University Entrance Exams

Following the release on 23 March of university entrance examination results which reported over 100,000 students failed to score high enough marks to be admitted into universities, Parliament summoned Ministers of Education and Higher Education to discuss the conduct of the exams. The results showed that students from insecure provinces, as well as female students throughout the country, represented the majority of the failures. As a result, both legislative houses agreed that the examination system was flawed and called for serious review.

The two ministers first attended the Meshrano Jirga plenary of 31 March where Education Deputy Minister Asif Nang represented Minister Farooq Wardak who could not attend.

Mr. Mahmood Danishjo (Balkh) blamed the high failure rate on how the examination was conducted. He claimed that students were not informed of the procedures involved in sitting for the exams and there were problems with calculating machines. He also criticized the decision by the Ministry of Education (MoE) to exclude the “33 years of jihadi history” from the history curriculum and for using “external” companies to print textbooks.

Mr. Hafiz Abdul Qayoum (Nuristan) said that the failure rate was becoming a matter of national security and suggested affirmative action for students from remote and insecure provinces to give them an opportunity to attain higher education. “The total number of students who have failed to pass the examinations in order to enroll in local universities in the last few years is enough to start a revolution in this country,” said Mr. Qayoum.

Ms. Taiba Zahidi (Herat) criticized the MoE for using outdated syllabi in teacher training programs before Mr. Baqi Baryal (Appointee) called for the Ministry of Public Works to offer special opportunities and privileges to the disabled.

Responding to the legislators’ questions, Higher Education Minister Obaidullah Ubaid said that he only assumed his post a week before the university entrance exam results were released. Mr. Ubaid added that his ministry invited various organizations to observe the exam grading process. “It took three hours for the machine to mark all scripts . . . 34,600 students were initially confirmed for enrollment in local universities. We were later advised that universities could accommodate 5,400 more students. As a result a total of 40,000 students were finally accepted into universities.” Minister Ubaid explained that an additional 60,000 high school graduates were admitted into other institutions, noting that it will be the first time 100,000 students have been accepted in universities and higher education centers in Afghanistan. Citing Germany as an example of a country where only 40% of its youths are in universities and colleges, the minister said that Afghanistan is doing much better than other developing countries as 60% of the high school graduates are pursuing higher education courses. He pledged to look into claims raised by some legislators earlier that some students who earned between 290 and 300 points were not admitted into universities.

Deputy Minister Nang said that his ministry could only absorb 30,000 graduates in teacher training institutions and colleges offering Sharia law and other professional studies. Responding to questions on the exclusion of jihadi history from the educational curriculum, Mr. Nang said an event is only considered to be historic 50 years after its occurrence. “The students’ curriculum was printed outside Afghanistan because no local printing press has the capacity to print 10 million books over a period of three months. Additionally prices quoted by local companies were up to six times more than what we paid abroad,” said Mr. Nang.

Meanwhile Mr. Ubaid and Mr. Nang also attended the Wolesi Jirga (WJ) plenary on 3 April. Mr. Ubaid advised the House that, of the 160,000 students who initially registered for the 1391 university entrance examinations, only 147,000 finally sat for the exams. The minister said that in provinces where less than 100 females sat for the examinations, those students would be given 15 extra points. “I have met with officials from 28 private universities and they have promised to offer scholarships to 715 students. They would also give 50% fee discounts to 12,000 students,” he said.

Responding to Minister Ubaid’s remarks, Mr. Sediq Ahmad Usmanee (Parwan) criticized the process used to score the tests, saying it lacked transparency. Mr. Sharifullah Kamawal (Kabul) said that former Higher Education Minister Sarwar Danish used to award scholarships only to students from one tribe. He also called for province-specific examinations as opposed to the current one-size-fits-all approach.

Ms. Shah Gul Rezayee (Ghazni) proposed that the MoE provide guidance to all Grade 12 pupils to familiarize them with the university entrance exams. Mr. Ahmad Behzad (Herat) opposed the idea of awarding female students extra points to improve their chances of entering universities, arguing that this would destroy and weaken the standard of education in the country. Mr. Ubaidullah Rameen (Baghlan) supported Mr. Behzad, saying that disabled students are more deserving and should be supported.

Subsequently, Higher Education Deputy Minister Mr. Sediqi admitted that there were flaws in the examination process and they will reevaluate between 5-10 answer tests per province to assess the grading system. He added that 5% of all scholarships are reserved for students with disabilities.

Minister Ubaidullah Ubaid pledged to work to provide quality education and would form a committee consisting of 3 legislators from each house of Parliament, along with education professionals and the security organizations who will be tasked with finding a lasting solution to problems in the higher education sector. He added that he would take proposals from the legislators to increase university lecturers’ working hours to President Hamid Karzai and the Council of Ministers for approval.

Mr. Qadir said members were not convinced by the government officials’ explanation on the conduct of the university entrance examinations. Amid applause from fellow MPs in the plenary, he said, “I propose that all female candidates be given 15 extra points and that universities begin to offer morning and afternoon classes. A system needs to be developed to build the capacity of students from remote provinces to afford them an opportunity to attain higher education.”

Senators Grill Minister on Lack of Cooperation from Government Officials

Following complaints from Senators last week over what they deemed to be lack of cooperation from government officials, the Meshrano Jirga (MJ) on 3 March invited Parliamentary Affairs Minister Hamayoun Azizi to respond to the lawmakers’ concerns.

Senators complained that government officials considered the Upper House less important than the Lower House, showing Senators less respect than MPs in the Wolesi Jirga. By way of examples, the Senators complained that the government failed to respond to MJ letters, did not invite them to attend provincial tours, nor fulfill promises made to the House.

Mr. Azizi acknowledged the Senators' frustration that government officials accorded preferential treatment towards the WJ. He said that the problem exists because the ministers and the other government officials wrongly think that, since the WJ has the authority to conduct a vote of confidence for ministers, ministers are therefore more responsible to that house. He promised to raise the issue in cabinet.

Mr. Azizi also agreed to follow up on the issue of provincial visits. "I will send a letter to all ministries requesting them to take both MJ and WJ members with them when they travel to provinces," said Mr. Azizi.

He blamed Senators, however, for his ministry's failure to follow up on commitments made to the Upper House by government officials. "In the past I have requested that you send me a list of the commitments made so I can present it to the cabinet and make them fulfill their promises. Up to now I have not received anything from you."

MPs Continue 1391 Budget Discussion

On 31 March Mr. Ameer Khan Yar (Nangahar) presented a report of the committee meeting of representatives of various Wolesi Jirga (WJ) committees ("joint committee") on the second draft of the 1391 budget. He informed members that the joint committee met on 28 March to review the second budget draft. The second draft was submitted following the WJ's rejection of the government's first budget proposal.

"There was an increase of AFN 87.7 million in the second draft's operating budget. This increase accounts for an allocation of AFN155 million to the Independent Directorate of Local Governance for the purchase of vehicles for district administrators. There was also an increase in the second budget draft for secretariat salaries in both the WJ and the Meshrano Jirga (MJ). The MJ was allocated an additional AFN12.5 million while the WJ budget was increased by an additional AFN20.3 million," Mr. Yar said. He further informed members that the second budget draft reduced the allocation to the president's discretionary budget by AFN50 million.

"We decided in the Wednesday meeting not to introduce the 1391 budget to the plenary for approval, at least for a few more days. There are some issues we need to first raise with the Minister of Finance, Mr. Omar Zakhilwal," said Mr. Yar.

Mr. Sediq Ahmad Usmanee (Parwan) added that the joint committee still needs to meet with Mr. Zakhilwal to further discuss MPs' concerns and demands, adding that once both the WJ and the Finance Minister agree, the second budget draft will be brought to the plenary for a vote.

Ms. Shukria Barakzai (Kabul) pointed out that Parliament does not have the authority to change the budget ceiling but may only propose to the Minister of Finance projects that should take precedence in the national budget. In her view, the WJ should not reject the second budget draft but instead seek to reach a compromise with Mr. Zakhilwal. "I also suggest that the Wolesi Jirga identify priority projects to be implemented in 1391 and that a special fund be allocated for the Badakhshan natural disaster," said Ms. Barakzai.

Mr. Mohammad Hussain Fahimi (Sar-e-Pul) criticized the House for debating the 1391 budget before deciding on the prior year's 1389 Qatia report. He referred to Article 88 of the WJ Rules of Procedure, which provides that "until the Qatia report of the government is finalized in the plenary session in accordance with article 98 of the Constitution, there shall be no debate over the government's budget".

Mr. Sayed Hussain Alamee Balkhi (Kabul) said Mr. Zakhilwal made slight changes to the budget and urged members to recommend projects that should be replaced by those proposed by MPs. "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has failed to spend AFN515 million appropriated since 2004. Nonetheless the budget includes an additional AFN150 million allocation. This would not be spent again . . . AFN50 million was

allocated to a new car wash facility in the presidential palace. I suggest we replace these projects with other infrastructural projects.”

Speaking to conclude the discussion, First Deputy Speaker, Mr. Haji Abdul Zaher Qadir (Nangarhar) tasked the Budget Committee with finalizing discussions on the second budget draft before submitting it to the plenary for a final vote. .

COMMITTEE NEWS

MJ Women Affairs Committee Seeks Ways to Curb Violence Against Women

The Meshrano Jirga (MJ) Women Affairs, Civil Society and Human Rights Committee this week invited various stakeholders to discuss ways to curb escalating cases of violence against women across the country. During two meetings this week, the Committee shared plans to hold a seminar aimed at identifying causes and solutions to domestic violence.

In her opening remarks, Ms. Sediqi Balkhi, the chairperson, expressed concern over the rise in violence against women and children in the country. She cited the prevalence of corruption and lack of a strong and active prosecution system for the surge in the crime.

The chairperson also briefed the guests on the Committee’s anticipated seminar to consider issues related to violence against women with participation of government ministries, civil society organizations, local and international entities Ms. Balkhi solicited from those attending the Committee meeting. .

Dr. Soraya Sobhrang, Commissioner with the Afghanistan International Human Rights Commission, recommended that the seminar should include a practical aspect. She suggested that the mandate of women organizations and women activists should be reviewed to establish a clear picture of the activities and services they have delivered to needy women. “Working committees should be established during the seminar to focus on various violence-related issues and obstacles in an effort to finally find solutions.”

Ms. Aseela Wardak, head of Human Rights Department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said that there is need for coordination with the Wolesi Jirga Women Affairs Committee on the planned seminar. Ms. Zolfia Zalmai from the Afghanistan Independent Bar Association criticized the failure of legal and judicial organizations to cooperate and coordinate efforts to offer standard facilities for victims. Ms. Zalmai alleged that there is corruption at all levels of these organizations.

Speaking in the 4 April meeting, Mr. Wazeer Ahmad Khorami Deputy head of the Civil Society and Human Rights Network, called for support to campaigns to raise public awareness about women’s Islamic and legal rights through television and scholars in Masjed. Mr. Khorami also suggested establishing a coordination mechanism among civil society organizations for better and effective services for people in various fields, and conducting capacity building programs for law preservation organizations and support the presence of women employees in them.

MJ Cultural Affairs and Education Committee Meets over Complaints

The Religious and Cultural Affairs, Education and Higher Education Committee of the Meshrano Jirga met on 31 March to discuss student complaints regarding the kankoor exam (university entrance tests) results. Mr. Baraiy Sediqi, head of Students’ Affairs in the Ministry of Higher Education and Mr. Siddiq Patman, Deputy Minister of Education, attended the meeting.

Mr. Sediqi briefed the Committee members about the kankoor exam. He said that the Ministry of Higher Education can enroll 40,000 students, adding; “We had less technical slip ups while conducting the kankoor exam than in past years.” Responding to Senator Khaqdad Balaghi’s (Kabul) concern that some students were able to take the exam in two provinces, Mr. Sediqi said that the Ministry has eliminated all double entries from the list; therefore this rarely happened this year.

Senator Danishjo criticized the ministry’s decision to limit to 35 years of age of students enrolling for masters degree programs. He also called for an overhaul of the education system, claiming it was not responsive to the requirements of the country. In response, the Committee decided to conduct a public hearing in order to gather expert input before discussing with Ministers of Education and Higher Education.

Mr. Sediqi informed the Committee members that the age limit for masters’ degree students has been dropped from higher education regulations, adding that the Council of Ministers has since passed the law and it will soon come to the National Assembly.

Explaining how the Ministry of Education will enroll 60,000 students into the higher education institutions, Deputy Minister Patman said 10,000 students will join teachers institutes, 20,000 will enter in-service training while another 10,000 will be enrolled in Islamic studies institutes. The remaining 20,000 will join professional and technical institutions.

Wolesi Jirga Internal Affairs Committee Rejects 1391 2nd Budget Draft

The Wolesi Jirga (WJ) Internal Affairs Committee on 1 April rejected the second draft of the 1391 budget submitted by the Ministry of Finance for the WJ approval.

During the meeting, some Committee members argued that, although the second budget draft budget did not reflect all the changes proposed by MPs, it should be approved because rejection of the government’s proposed budget will result in delays to development projects, which will negatively impact the Afghan people.

Meanwhile, most of the Committee members calling for the rejection of the second draft of the proposed budget based their argument on the proposed budget allocation of USD80 million to the Central Bank to replace funds used to bail out Kabul Bank and another USD80 million allocated to the President’s discretionary budget. They suggested that USD40 million be deducted from the President’s vote and together with the US\$80 million allocation for Kabul Bank be diverted to important development programs. They also did not agree with procedural issues of the proposed budget, which give more authority to the Ministry of Finance.

Finally, a majority of the Committee members voted to reject the second proposed budget draft and assigned Ms. Shekeba Hashemi (Kandahar) to present the Committee’s position to the WJ Committee on Budget and Finance.