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Afghanistan: Freedom of expression an essential right

It is absolutely essential that freedom of expression is ensured in Afghanistan, said Amnesty International as the Constitutional Loya Jirga (CLJ) draws to a close in Kabul and debate around key issues intensifies.

Amnesty International has received reports that intimidation and fear of retribution are preventing some delegates from participating freely in the CLJ.

Dominance by strong political and armed factional leaders and the absence of the rule of law in many parts of the country contributes to an atmosphere of insecurity for delegates who wish to act independently of powerful political groups. Some delegates fear for their safety of their families and for their own lives, especially after they return home at the end of the CLJ.

It is particularly worrying that even the elected leadership of the Loya Jirga have been involved in curtailing the freedom of speech during the Loya Jirga. In one example, a petition was circulated suggesting that the country's official name should be changed from the 'Islamic republic of Afghanistan' to the 'republic of Afghanistan'. The petition gained over 151 signatures, but the chair of the CLJ, Sebghatollah Mojadedi, refused to allow a vote on the issue, publicly calling those who had sponsored the petition 'infidels'. Amnesty International is concerned that this could place the sponsors of this petition in serious danger.

"The onus must be on the elected leadership of the CLJ to set an example by facilitating a free debate upholding freedom of expression. Discussions conducted in an atmosphere of fear will not produce a Constitution that protects the human rights of the Afghan people." Amnesty International concluded.

Background information

The Loya Jirga has highlighted the complex divisions within Afghan society and debate has been heated around a few key issues such as the role of Islam, the powers of the Presidency and other highly symbolic issues such as the national language.

Public Document

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