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Afghan election candidates in fear of attacks

Afghan election candidates, campaigners and voters have told Amnesty International that they are facing increasing attacks and threats from the Taliban and other insurgent groups in the run-up to Afghanistan's 18 September parliamentary elections.

Women candidates are at particular risk and some have told Amnesty International that local security forces refuse to offer them protection and even ridicule them when they do report threats or violence against them.

"Two weeks ago the Taliban put a 'night letter' behind my door and in the morning I took it to the local police station but no one wanted to take the threat seriously. One of the police officers told me that if I wanted to run for office then I deserved to be harassed," a female parliamentary candidate told Amnesty International. She asked to remain anonymous, in fear of becoming a target for both police forces and insurgents in her district.

Since July, three election candidates and at least 15 campaign workers have been killed, and several injured in failed attempts to assassinate them. At least two candidates were abducted and later released.

The Taliban have claimed responsibility for the killing of the three candidates and many of the other attacks on candidates and their campaigners.

Amnesty International has urged the Afghan government to ensure equal access to police protection for all candidates based on an objective security assessment, not on gender or political affiliation.

"The people of Afghanistan should not have to choose between their safety and participation in public life," said Madhu Malhotra, Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific Deputy Director.

"The Afghan government must take seriously any attacks and threats against candidates, and order prompt and impartial investigations into these abuses when they occur. The Taliban must also immediately stop attacks on civilians, including those involved in the election."

Election candidates have told Amnesty International that despite repeated requests for protection from Taliban attacks, Afghan police forces have failed to respond to, or even to investigate, reported violence against candidates.

Another female parliamentary candidate, who also wished to remain anonymous, told Amnesty International that she was recently shot and injured by gunmen while campaigning.

"The police arrested two people who were found to be linked to a local power holder in a northern province. These people now have been released and I feel extremely frightened," she said. "I have since asked for police protection but haven't received any."

The Independent Election Commission (IEC), a government body which oversees the poll, reported on 5 September that at least 938 of the more than 6,800 polling centres throughout Afghanistan will not open due to security concerns.

The centres remaining closed are primarily in the south and east of Afghanistan where insurgent groups wield control over vast swathes of these areas.

On 13 September the Afghan President's office stated that security forces are completely prepared to ensure safe voting throughout the country.

However, according to the Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA), an Afghan NGO, candidates in 14 out of 34 provinces have expressed concerns over inadequate security provision at their campaigning venues and other candidates told Amnesty International that they didn't think security provisions were going to be any better on election day.

FEFA observers in the eastern province of Nangarhar recently reported large disparities between the protection provided between candidates favoured by local government officials and others.

"The Afghan security forces must ensure that voters and candidates are given adequate security and protection based on an objective assessment of need. Everyone, including women, should be able to participate without fear of attacks and threats," said Madhu Malhotra.