

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) is conducting an observation mission and analyzing Afghanistan's electoral process before, during and after the April 5 presidential and provincial council elections. This mission involves more than 100 international and Afghan analysts and observers throughout the country.

Social media sparks legal debate in campaign

For the first time in an Afghan election, social media is emerging as an important battleground – and the trend has prompted a legal debate about who should regulate Facebook comments that sometimes turn abusive.

In Herat, Provincial Council (PC) candidates complained to provincial prosecutor Maria Bashir that they were being attacked on Facebook, BBC's Persian-language website reported. Bashir threatened to jail the culprits, noting that she had recently heard two cases of non-election related abuse on social media and sentenced one man to two years in jail.

Referring to the incident, Hashmatullah Radfar, deputy head of the Independent Election Commission (IEC) media commission, said such complaints should not be referred directly to the judicial system. At a March 17 press conference in Kabul, he said the Electoral Media Commission is the proper body to carry out investigations and issue penalties.

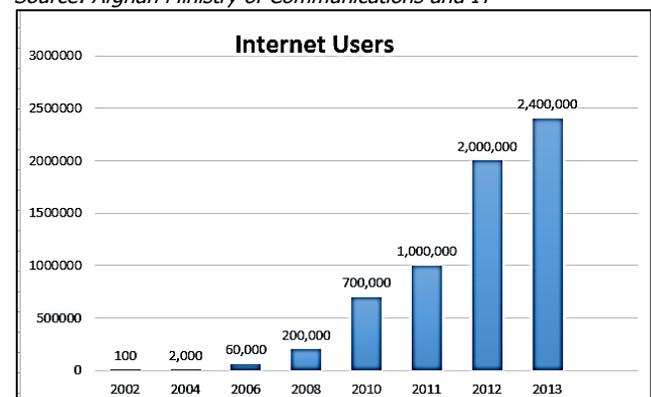
The case signifies the increasing use of social media during this election process, which has allowed candidates to reach out to voters online and has sparked heated digital debates. Candidates and campaign staff told NDI that social media are essential campaign tools, and Deputy Minister of Youth Affairs Tiamoor Shah Es-haqzai said the amount of online discussion in the run-up to this year's election is unprecedented.

Afghan youth in particular have embraced social media as access to the Internet has grown over the past few years, especially with the spread of mobile phone networks throughout the country. Afghanistan had about 2.4 million Internet users in 2013, according to the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology. That number rose from 2004 when there were only 2,000 Afghans online during presidential elections. By the 2010 *Wolesi Jirga* elections, there were 700,000.

This year, Facebook pages authored by presidential and PC candidates and their supporters have sprung up. Twitter is less popular, and only six of the 11 candidates on the presidential ballot have accounts in their names. Ashraf Ghani has the most followers with more than 11,000. Zalmay Rassoul has more than 1,000. Both Abdullah Abdullah and Abdul Rahim Wardak have just below 1,000. (Wardak announced on March 16 that he is pulling out of the presidential race). Gul Agha Sherzai posted his first tweet in November 2013 and has 30 followers so far. Daoud Sultanzoy has gained nine followers since joining in February 2014.

Candidates also are reaching out to voters via conventional media. The head of the media commission, Farida Nikzad, said the results of the commission's first media monitoring report indicates that news outlets have provided generally "neutral" coverage, including the state broadcaster Radio Television Afghanistan, which was accused of favoring Hamid Karzai during his 2009 presidential bid. However, Nikzad said some private media affiliated with certain candidates are breaking regulations by focusing almost entirely on one candidate.

Source: Afghan Ministry of Communications and IT



Campaign finance rules prove difficult to enforce

No	Candidate Name	Total Expenditures (AFA)	Total Received Donations (AFA)
1	Dr. Abdullah Abdullah	4,545,350	7,554,500
2	Muhammad Dawoud Sultanzoi	147,379	0
3	Abdul Rahim Wardak	399,280	0
4	Abdul Qayom Karzai	6,364,754	1,105,000
5	Muhammad Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai	4,238,875	2,340,000
6	Muhammad Nader Naeem	4,183,247	2,350,000
7	Zalmai Rasoul	4,600,500	4,350,000
8	Eng. Qutbuddin Helal	5,179,941	0
9	Muhamad Shafiq Gul Agha Shirzai	3,072,870	0
10	Prof. Abdul Rab Rasoul Sayaf	5,228,674	540,000
11	Hedayat Amin Arsala	3,565,648	1,009,150
Total		41,526,518	19,248,650

Source: IEC website, March 18, 2014

Two candidates who announced they were dropping out of the presidential race have yet to submit official withdrawal forms, and the IEC said they remain subject to regulations, including the filing of campaign finance reports.

Abdul Rahim Wardak announced his withdrawal March 16 and Qayum Karzai said March 6 that he was dropping out of the race. As ballots for the April 5 election were printed before these announcements, the names of both candidates are on the presidential ballot.

The IEC said it warned Qayum Karzai and Abdul Rahim Wardak that until they officially withdraw, the commission will consider them active candidates who are expected to file expenses by March 28 and can be fined for campaign violations.

Qayum Karzai announced he was backing Zalmai Rassoul, raising the possibility that he could officially withdraw and use his campaign resources to support Rassoul. While candidates are forbidden to campaign for other candidates, the IEC said the electoral law does not prevent private citizens from doing so.

Presidential candidates are allowed to spend no more than 10,000,000 Afghanis (about USD \$175,000) on their campaigns and are required to declare the

amount of donations they receive and their expenditures throughout the campaign. The IEC posts this information on its website. As of March 18, the total amount of donations received by four of the 11 candidates, including Wardak, is not listed.

Aside from cash donations, representatives from presidential campaigns told NDI that supporters provided resources, including offices and furniture, for free. Under IEC rules, such in-kind contributions should be declared. But the commission said it was difficult to verify expenditures, and has even called on civil society groups and the public to examine documents and report any suspicions that the candidates are overspending.

Candidates who violate expenditure limits face penalties, including disqualification. But provincial council candidates have told NDI that the cap of 500,000 Afghanis (about \$8,700) for them is far too low. They said anybody mounting a serious campaign needs to exceed the maximum to pay for costly but necessary expenditures, such as advertising.

Candidate disqualifications continue

The Independent Electoral Complaints Commission (IECC) reported disqualifying 205 PC candidates (as of today). The IECC said it will provide the list to the IEC, which will make it public. Here is a timeline of the IECC's disqualifications:

- **19 November:** 40 candidates are disqualified for not meeting the minimum educational requirement. As these candidates were disqualified before the ballot lottery, their names are not on the printed ballots.
- **27 January:** 25 candidates are disqualified for not meeting the minimum age requirement.
- **16 February:** 19 candidates are disqualified for not meeting the minimum age requirement.
- **3 March:** Five candidates are disqualified due to invalid education documents.
- **13 March:** 87 candidates are disqualified due to invalid education and proof of age documents.
- **17 March:** The IECC asked 57 candidates to attend a meeting and explain inconsistencies in their documents.
- **18 March:** 29 candidates are disqualified.