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**KUCHI CANDIDATES OUTLINE PRIORITIES AT NDI ROUNDTABLE**

*Voice Strong Desire to Take Part in Peace-Building Process*

KABUL, AFGHANISTAN – A first-time dialogue with Kuchi candidates, focusing on their priorities and desire to participate in Afghanistan’s peace-building process, was held here Tuesday, organized by the National Democratic Institute (NDI).

The Kuchis are nomads from different ethnic tribes who travel throughout Afghanistan and change locations with the seasons. They are recognized by the Afghan constitution and a nationwide district has been created to ensure that they have representation in parliament. This year 52 candidates – 10 female and 42 male – ran for 10 seats designated for Kuchis in the *Wolesi Jirga*, the lower house. Three of the seats are reserved for women.

The NDI roundtable brought together 14 Kuchis of both sexes who ran as candidates in the Sept. 18 parliamentary elections; two of them were successful. The event was a rare opportunity to hear their vision as a parliamentary group and the aspirations among Kuchi political activists to improve conditions for the Kuchi people, collaborate with other ethnic communities, and participate in building a peaceful and stable Afghanistan.

The candidates spotlighted several Kuchi problems including the lack of employment opportunities, a high child mortality rate, and the significant number of women who die in childbirth or miscarry because of harsh conditions and a lack medical care. The candidates said they want to strengthen the rights of Kuchi children and women, and establish peace with other ethnic groups and communities.

The candidates said the Afghan government often ignores the concerns of the Kuchis, who they said could contribute significantly to the country’s reconciliation process. Since the Kuchis move throughout the country, including into Taliban-inhabited areas, they could engage insurgent groups and help the Afghan government bring people together to help achieve peace, the candidates said. But they lamented that no one has asked for their participation in peace-building efforts.

“We are Kuchis but we are also Afghans,” said Zarah Shah Zaheer, one of the candidates. “We want peace and we want economic progress and stability too – and there is a lot we can do to help.”

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