

US bullying and threats at Afghanistan's *loya jirga*

Peter Symonds
15 June 2002

Afghanistan's *loya jirga* or grand tribal council, currently in session in Kabul, was never intended to provide anything more than a thin veneer of democracy for an Afghan administration beholden politically and economically to the major powers, above all to the US. But as the gathering was about to convene this week, what was prepared as a piece of political theatre rapidly descended into farce.

The plans for the *loya jirga* were drawn up in the UN Security Council and sanctioned by a handpicked conference convened by the UN near the German city of Bonn last December. The selection of the 1,501 *loya jirga* delegates was presided over by a committee, appointed and supervised by UN officials. The committee not only held the power of veto over elected delegates but chose 500 businessmen, clerics and others to represent special interest groups.

Those "elected" were chosen indirectly by gatherings of representatives, which were in turn selected at local assemblies supervised by the UN and *loya jirga* committee. The whole process, which has taken place over more than a month, has been wide open to manipulation, vote-buying and thuggery. One Western monitor told the *Washington Post*: "In dozens, perhaps hundreds, of local elections, militia leaders and regional strongmen have muscled their way into the *loya jirga* by spreading money among voters, marshalling blocks of support among their followers or simply dominating their old political turf."

These are the 1,501 delegates presently gathered amid heavy security in an air-conditioned German beer tent on a disused soccer field in Kabul. As far as the Bush administration was concerned, the main purpose of the *loya jirga* was to rubberstamp the current interim Afghan leader Hamid Karzai, who was appointed at Bonn, as the head of a transitional administration to run the country and prepare for elections in 18 months time. Karzai has a long association with Washington stretching back to the 1980s when he liaised with the CIA and Pakistani intelligence on behalf of one of the Mujaheddin groups fighting the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul.

The *loya jirga* has not gone to plan, however. It was due to be formally opened on Monday by the 87-year-old former Afghan king, Mohammad Zahir Shah, who only returned in April after decades of exile in Italy. As far as the UN and the Bonn conference were concerned, the aged monarch was to have a purely ceremonial role. Karzai's election, which was sewn up in a series of backroom factional meetings over the past few weeks,

was to be dispensed with on the first day. But some Pashtun leaders thought otherwise and began to publicly back Zahir Shah against Karzai as the transitional head of state.

The conflict underscores the highly unstable character of political relations in Afghanistan, which are wracked by ethnic, religious and clan rivalries that have been exacerbated by two decades of war. Karzai has the backing, at least at present, of the US and major powers but within Afghanistan he lacks any significant social base of his own and has had to balance between the competing warlords, tribal leaders and militia commanders who currently control much of the country.

The continuing US military operations, which have been concentrated in the majority Pashtun areas in the south and east, have added to Karzai's political problems. The rising toll of civilian casualties caused by American bombing and special forces raids have generated growing hostility to the US military presence. Opposition to Karzai's sycophantic relations with Washington have become so widespread that even international media reports have begun to describe him with phrases like "considered an American stooge by his opponents".

A number of Pashtun tribal leaders, who have their own axe to grind with Karzai, sought to exploit the opposition to Karzai, also a Pashtun, by proposing Zahir Shah as an alternative. Last weekend militia leader Padshah Khan Zadran insisted that the *loya jirga* had to decide the issue and that political stability would be shattered if the former king was not elected leader. Khan fell out with Karzai several months ago after he was passed over for the post of governor of Gardez and then tried to oust Karzai's appointee by force.

By proposing Zahir Shah as head of state, Khan hoped to galvanise Pashtun sentiment against Karzai. Any constitutional role for the Pashtun monarch is strongly opposed by the Northern Alliance, which largely comprises militia groups from the country's Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara minorities. By raising the issue, Khan sought to highlight the powerful role of the Northern Alliance, which holds three key ministries in the present Karzai administration. All three ministers had declared their backing for Karzai as the next president.

Karzai also faced a challenge from another quarter. Northern Alliance leader Burhanuddin Rabbani declared that he would be a candidate for head of state. Rabbani was pushed aside by Washington after the US invasion of Afghanistan. Even though he was formally recognised by the UN as the country's president,

Rabbani was not invited to the Bonn conference last December nor was he given any ministerial post. Three younger Northern Alliance leaders—Younis Qanooni, Abdullah Abdullah and General Qassim Fahim—were chosen instead to fill the ministerial posts of interior, foreign affairs and defence, respectively.

The prospect of an open debate and vote for the Afghan head of state at the *loya jirga* alarmed Washington. Under pressure from the US special envoy to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, the opening was delayed, first for hours and then for the rest of Monday. A “well-informed” source cited by the Pakistani *Dawn* newspaper reported that Khalilzad had called for the delay “because there’s no deal on the table yet”. One can only imagine the vigorous arm-twisting that was done behind the scenes to ensure that a deal was in place before proceedings began.

To make clear who was running the show, Khalilzad preempted any formal declarations by hastily convening a press conference to declare that the former king would not be running against Karzai. “He would like to issue a statement this evening that he is not a candidate for head of state or the government... and that he supports Mr Karzai’s candidacy,” Khalilzad told the media.

Late on Monday, Zahir Shah dutifully appeared before the press, flanked by Karzai, Khalilzad and foreign minister Abdullah, to explain that he did not intend to restore the monarchy and was not a candidate for any position. Matters, it appeared, had been put in order. On Tuesday, Rabbani announced that he was withdrawing his candidacy “in the interests of national unity”. Younis Qanooni declared that he would resign as interior minister, giving Karzai a further boost. He could now deny Pashtun accusations that he was a front-man for the Tajiks.

The European Union envoy to Afghanistan, Klaus-Peter Klaiber, hinted at the arguments that were used to bring Rabbani and others into line when he told a German radio station: “If [the new government] fails to exert control over the whole country, it will be very difficult to keep development aid flowing sensibly.” In other words, if the new regime were not to the liking of the major powers, the destitute country would be starved of even the minimal economic aid currently flowing into the coffers.

But there was to be a further glitch as the king opened the gathering. His speech went according to the script. Zahir Shah told the delegates: “I am ready to help the people, Hamid Karzai is my choice of candidate.” A round of applause from the audience. Karzai bathed in the glory and then promptly declared to a Reuters correspondent after the session that the assembly had just elected him as head of state. No doubt, as far as Karzai was concerned, everything had gone to plan. The only problem was that no vote had actually been taken.

This new affront to basic democratic processes sparked off another round of protests. Karzai was compelled to make a humiliating retraction. The election of the new head of state, which was meant to be decided on Monday, took another two days as some delegates vented their anger at the overt manipulation of the proceedings by Khalilzad, Klaus-Peter Klaiber and other international “observers”.

Alex Thier, an analyst with the European-based International Crisis Centre, described the mood: “There is a risk now that there will be no real debate or decision-making at the *loya jirga* at all,

just up and down votes. People worked hard to get elected and make the process go well, but now they feel they are being presented with a *fait accompli*.”

Sima Samar, Karzai’s deputy and minister for women’s affairs, angrily declared: “This is not a democracy. This is a rubber stamp. Everything has already been decided by the powerful ones.” Another delegate said: “Everything seems to have been decided. But, we don’t need anyone to decide for us. We have had enough of foreign interference in our country.”

Others attacked Karzai’s proposal to bestow the ceremonial title of “Father of the Nation” on the king. “Some people say Afghanistan is not the same as it was 20 years ago, but the people still have free will,” one said. “Yesterday you named the king as father of the nation, but he has never been my father. We want freedom and democracy.”

Mohammed Shah Ahsanzoda, an elderly delegate, denounced the obvious presence of militia leaders and warlords at the gathering. Under the formal rules for the convening the *loya jirga*, anyone involved in human rights atrocities was to be barred as a delegate. “You told us there would be no delegates with bloodied hands or armed forces, but you did not abide by your words,” he said. “There are so many armed people outside that I don’t know if this is a *loya jirga* or a military council.”

At the end of three days of deliberations, however, the vast majority of the carefully vetted delegates fell into line. Delegates finally voted on Thursday for the transitional head of state. On this occasion, Karzai was elected with a substantial majority of 1,295 votes against two relatively unknown opponents, Masooda Jalal, a female employee of the World Food Program, and Mir Mohammed Mahfoz Nadai, who received 171 votes and 89 votes, respectively.

The vote, however, has resolved nothing. Karzai will now have to pay off all those with whom he has made deals to secure the necessary votes. The various political powerbrokers, regional warlords and militia commanders will tolerate his continuation in the top position as long as he is able to continue his precarious balancing act and to be the conduit for foreign economic aid and assistance.

The entire process of the *loya jirga* has revealed that Karzai is nothing more than a political pawn for the US and other major powers that hold the basic democratic rights of ordinary Afghans in complete contempt. That can only add to the groundswell of opposition and hostility developing towards the continued US and UN presence in the country.



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