

US-imposed “democracy” in Afghanistan

Loya jirga rubber-stamps autocratic regime

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After more than three weeks of cajoling, back-room haggling and standover tactics, the 502 largely unelected delegates to the United States-orchestrated *loya jirga*, or grand tribal council, in Afghanistan this week endorsed a constitution aimed at strengthening the crumbling position of Washington’s handpicked interim president, Hamid Karzai.

Following intense arm-twisting of faction leaders by US President George Bush’s envoy and ambassador to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, and UN special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, the assembly—a huge tent full of representatives of warlords, mullahs and outright US stooges—rubber-stamped a constitution on January 4.

While media reports presented the outcome as a triumph for democracy, the assembly was a travesty from start to finish. Karzai selected 50 of the delegates, while the various militia, religious and ethnic elites that have been complicit in the US-led military occupation, chose the others. Amid growing resistance to the puppet regime, they could only meet under armed guard. Even then, the proceedings were threatened by a series of rocket attacks on the site, including one last weekend.

Perhaps the most revealing moment came when Malalai Joya, a 26-year-old female social worker from the rural province of Farah, stood up to condemn most of the jirga’s committee chairmen as criminals. Instead of being given influential positions, she declared, they should be tried for their crimes. Joya was initially thrown out of the meeting, then allowed to remain and is now under UN protection from death threats.

The crimes to which she referred were the widespread rocket shellings, torture, rape and mass killings of civilians committed by Islamic fundamentalist warlords—mujahideen, or holy warriors—from 1992 to 1996 before they were ousted by the Taliban extremists. The US and its allies are today relying upon the same thugs to rule Afghanistan. One of the most prominent delegates was General Abdul Rashid Dostum, whose Northern Alliance forces massacred thousands of Taliban prisoners in the desert near Mazar-i-Sharif during the US invasion in November 2001.

So anti-democratic was the entire process that no vote was even taken on the final version of the document. Instead, at the urging of the chairman, most of those present simply stood briefly to signify their acceptance. Just three days earlier, the

meeting had been suspended in disarray when some 40 percent of the delegates boycotted the first and only vote at the gathering.

Led by former president Burhanuddin Rabbani, the coalition of minority ethnic factions, including his Tajik clan, Uzbeks and Hazaras, called for the appointment of a prime minister to restrict the sweeping powers allocated to the president. They also demanded official recognition of minority languages and called for a ban on ministers holding dual citizenship. The latter provision was primarily directed at those in Karzai’s camp who are US citizens.

Once Khalilzad and Brahimi stepped in to lay down the law, Rabbani and his allies quickly acceded to an autocratic presidency. The president will rule without a prime minister. He will have the power to appoint and dismiss ministers, key officials, judges and military, police and intelligence chiefs, as well as one-third of the upper house of the national assembly. He will be the commander-in-chief of the armed forces and can declare states of emergency for the whole or parts of the country.

In return, Karzai and his backers made minor concessions. They added a second vice president to represent minority interests and gave the national assembly the right to approve some presidential appointments. Alongside the two official languages, Pashto (spoken by ethnic Pashtuns) and Dari (Tajik), other languages will be recognised in regions where they are spoken by a majority of people. Apparently, Karzai agreed to learn Uzbek. There will no ban on dual citizenship, but the national assembly can reject individual officials who hold foreign passports.

Karzai also struck a deal with hard-line Islamic fundamentalists to include a clause prohibiting any law from offending Islam. This means that, despite the lip service paid by the constitution to democratic rights, including equal status for women, reactionary Islamic precepts will prevail. Karzai had already appointed Fazal Hadi Shinwari as chief justice of the Supreme Court. In violation of the constitution, Shinwari is over the age limit and has training only in religious, not secular, law.

He is an ally of the pro-Wahhabi, Saudi-backed fundamentalist leader Ustad Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, who was a

committee chairman in the *loya jirga*. Shinwari has packed the Supreme Court with sympathetic mullahs, called for Taliban-style punishments and brought back the Taliban's dreaded Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, renamed the Ministry of Haj and Religious Affairs. It deploys squads to stop public displays of "un-Islamic" behaviour among Afghan women.

Presidential elections are meant to be held under the new constitution by June, to be followed by assembly elections. But the deteriorating economic and security situation in the country makes that schedule unlikely. UN envoy Brahimi has already told the *New York Times* that assembly elections would be "well nigh impossible" because the threat of Taliban insurgents make large parts of the country inaccessible.

For his part, Rabbani has made it plain that the conflicts that wracked the *loya jirga* have by no means receded. He declared that the backroom dictates issued in Kabul had only damaged the administration's credibility and warned that the strong presidential system could "push Afghanistan to a dictatorship".

Despite the deeply reactionary character of the gathering in Kabul, UN secretary-general Kofi Annan praised the outcome as an historic achievement. President Bush welcomed the constitution, declaring that "a democratic Afghanistan will serve the interests and just aspirations of all the Afghan people".

The major media outlets, including the erstwhile liberal press, dutifully echoed these remarks. The *New York Times* editorial called the constitution "enlightened" and said the Bush administration was "justifiably thrilled by the outcome". It endorsed ongoing US military control of the country, "to help provide the political support and military security to make presidential and parliamentary elections possible".

No democracy

To even speak of democracy in these circumstances is farcical. Washington has illegally conquered one of the most impoverished and ruined countries on earth, overturned its government and joined hands with notorious butchers to repress and intimidate the population. Around 12,000 US-led combat troops remain in Afghanistan, terrorising the population in the name of hunting down Taliban and Al Qaeda supporters. They are accompanied by 5,700 NATO "peacekeepers," which are mainly propping up the Karzai administration in the capital.

Even the timetable for elections in Afghanistan is driven by the Bush administration's immediate domestic political considerations. It badly needs a symbolic show of success for its "war on terror" in the lead-up to the US presidential election in November. It is proceeding with its characteristic mixture of cynicism and short-sightedness. All that matters in Afghanistan

is a public relations victory, regardless of the completely catastrophic reality.

Many parts of the country are no longer safe for allied troops, or for that matter, UN officials, aid workers and ordinary civilians. Mounting guerilla attacks have forced international aid agencies to withdraw to Kabul, halting even elementary welfare efforts. On December 18, the World Food Program admitted that its food distribution program had been severely affected by the breakdown in security.

The deteriorating situation was highlighted on January 6, when a truck bomb blast near a military base in the southern city of Kandahar killed at least 16 people and wounded 52, many of them school children. Despite the indiscriminate terror employed by the insurgents, the methods being employed by the US seem to be simply increasing support for the Taliban fundamentalists.

Heavy-handed repression by US troops is intensifying popular opposition and resistance to the occupation, particularly in the southern and eastern Pashtun regions. Last month, the US military launched its largest operations in Afghanistan since the overthrow of the Taliban, aimed at tracking down anti-government forces and quelling wider unrest in the lead-up to the *loya jirga*.

Karzai's fiefdom is largely confined to Kabul, where US troops guard him around the clock. Elsewhere, private armies roam, with a total of half a million men under arms, some linked to drug barons and others to members of Karzai's government.

There is no prospect that even the semblance of a democratic regime will emerge in Afghanistan under these hellish and neo-colonial conditions. Democracy is only possible through a genuine popular revolution, spearheaded by the working class, throughout the Middle East and Central Asia. Only such a movement could liberate the region from decades of great power domination and overcome its legacy of economic backwardness, warlordism and theocratic oppression.



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