

Compromise Key To Loya Jirga Success

Delegates to the Afghan grand assembly must strike a balance between democracy and stability otherwise it could serve to divide the Afghan nation once again

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By Ahmed Rashid/ Kabul.

The outcome of the Loya Jirga, the supreme national council meeting Tuesday to begin the process of appointing a transitional government, is likely to be entirely unpredictable.

Many people had expected that a deal would be cut beforehand, balancing the interests of the various groups, and with strong international influence: the assembly would be colourful theatre but the real decisions would have been taken in back rooms.

But having consulted with players on all sides, I believe that no advance agreements have been concluded. While there have been many discussions and debates, the deals themselves are going to be worked out during the course of the Loya Jirga.

This is a good thing. People's voices will be heard. There will be greater democracy, and the people - through the elected representatives - will have the opportunity to choose their own leaders for the first time.

But there is also a risk. So much uncertainty could increase tension. The assembly could serve to divide the Afghan nation once again, rather than bring it together. So there is an issue of striking a balance between democracy and stability.

The prospects are only made more complex because, of the four major political groups, each is itself divided.

First there is the ex-king, Zahir Shah. On the eve of the assembly, there have been reports that he will not to stand for office. This will disappoint those among his supporters - in particular many Pashtun delegates from the south and east - who wanted him to play a political role as president.

The latter see Zahir Shah as the only figure who can dilute the power of the Panjshiris - Tajiks from the Panjshir valley who form the core of the Northern Alliance or United Front and who currently hold the main power ministries - namely defence, interior and foreign affairs.

The other group around the ex-king felt he was too old and sick to be president, and preferred to see him take up a more symbolic role as Baba, or father of the nation.

Next, there is the Panjshiri group, which is also divided. Some of them realise that they must give up control of some of the key ministries if the Loya Jirga is to produce a broad-based, representative government.

They recognise the antagonism, and understand the need to incorporate other groups if an acceptable government is to be formed.

Others don't want to give up any power, however. Defence Minister Mohammad Fahim said at a recent press conference that the same government must continue, and placed all kinds of conditions on his willingness to relinquish his post.

Then there is the so-called Jehadi group. This includes former mujahedin leaders such as Professor Rasoul Sayyaf, former president Burhanuddin Rabbani, as well as ex-Taleban. They are also split.

One group, led by Rabbani, would have liked to have struck a deal with the ex-king - agreeing to him becoming president so that one of them could become prime minister. Others don't want to make any such pacts. They prefer to remain a separate group, to maintain their ideology and their unity through the Loya Jirga, even if they don't win major positions.

Lastly, there is the group around Hamed Karzai, chairman of the interim administration and widely tipped to be reconfirmed as Afghan leader, at the assembly. He has the ability to appeal to all ethnic groups and all the delegates. But to win support from the majority of the floor, he has to get concessions from the Panjshiris. Although he is Pashtun, many people see him as part of the Panjshiri group. So he has to appeal to supporters of the ex-king, and show Zahir Shah respect.

Karzai will also have to make concessions to other ethnic groups. To win over the Shia Hazara - the Pashtuns are Sunni Muslims - he has to support freedom of religion and Hazara rights. He also has to appeal to urban delegates, educated and modern people who think he hasn't done enough in the past six months.

So Karzai has to do five or six things at the same time, some of which are mutually contradictory.

Amid these conflicts between the main groups, and within them, the big unknown is the floor. This makes the process exciting, but also entirely unpredictable and somewhat risky.

There will be severe criticism from the delegates, especially of the warlords, most of who will be in the room. This is very healthy - a first chance for people to confront those who have been responsible for so much of the misery in Afghanistan.

But such criticism also needs to be controlled by the chair to ensure that it does not lead to a breakdown of the Loya Jirga.

There is also a chance that all other ethnic groups will gang up on the Panjshiris, who control the military and were therefore given the real levers of control in the country during the Bonn conference last year. A Panjshiri walkout would be a disaster, however, so the process will challenge all sides to act responsibly, especially the Panjshiris themselves.

Other factors could also affect the result. The largest single group is the 300 Pashtun delegates from the south and east. But the Jumbesh-e Melli Islami, for example, under General Abdul Rashid Dostum, though smaller, are more united, so they might be able to extract disproportionate concessions.

The Afghan way is, at the end, to make a deal, and people are truly tired of war and want to move on. So despite the risks and uncertainties, I am optimistic that a government will be formed that is acceptable to everyone.

Even more than that, for the first time, the process will be transparent. None of these leaders has appeared before in front of the public. The experience will be challenging for them but very good for Afghan democracy. When the Loya Jirga finally gets going, there will be no back room deals, no changing sides again and again, no exchanging of money as has happened so many times in the past. For the first time, the leaders will have to respond to the 1,600 people on the floor, and realise that they are responsible to the people.

Ahmed Rashid is a correspondent for The Daily Telegraph and author of Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia