

The Old Way

There's no shortage of violence in the process of establishing a new, multi-ethnic government

Far Eastern Economic Review- 28/03/2002

By Ahmed Rashid/Kabul

On March 23 the first, long-awaited step in a genuine political process to choose a new government in Afghanistan after 24 years of war kicks off, with the publishing of the rules and procedures for the loya jirga, or grand tribal council.

Millions of Afghan people are placing their future hopes for peace and stability on the meeting of the loya jirga, which former King Zahir Shah will open in June. Rival warlords-including those with posts in the interim government-are also preparing, trying to capture territory and influence so that they can fill the loya jirga with their loyalists and relatives rather than the people's representatives.

"People are waiting and we will deliver what they want-a free and fair process to choose their representatives to the loya jirga," says Mohammed Ismail Qassimyar, the chairman of the 21-member Loya Jirga Commission. The commission was established by last year's United Nations-mandated Bonn peace process to prepare for the council. Its members-neutral lawyers, professors and doctors, including three women-were chosen by the UN.

When it meets in June, the loya jirga will establish a new, two-year transitional government, nominate a head of state and a head of government, choose a commission to debate the country's future constitution and set up procedures to build a civil service and judicial system.

Much of the international community involved in the reconstruction of Afghanistan would like to see interim leader Hamid Karzai as the new head of government, though foreign support doesn't guarantee him the post.

Intense political activity in preparation for the loya jirga has already begun as 800-1,000 representatives will be chosen amongst tribes, clans and urban communities. Each group will make selections through indirect elections in meetings held according to its own cultural practices.

Traditionally the loya jirga was made up of tribal and clan chiefs from every ethnic group in the country. Qassimyar is extending the membership to include representatives from the millions of Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan, the vast Afghan diaspora across the world, women, technocrats, businessmen and even nomads. Many of these will be chosen by the commission rather than by election, because of their influence, skill, or because they belong to small ethnic minorities.

"The future of the country rests on the decisions of the loya jirga being accepted by the majority of people," says Abdul Aziz Ahmed, vice-chairman of the Loya Jirga Commission.

women are the driving force

Notably, women's groups will be able to post their own candidates. "We will have more women in the loya jirga than in any representative parliament or body of any Muslim country," says Soraya Parluka, a former head of the Afghan Red Crescent and now a member of the Loya Jirga Commission. Others say more than 100 women will participate in the loya jirga.

"Women are the driving force of the political process. They want peace and disarming of the warlords," says Parluka. The presence of so many women will be revolutionary for a country that has suffocated since 1994 under the Taliban, whose harsh rules essentially banned women from public life.

Nevertheless the danger of warlords trying to disrupt the indirect elections is real. Qassimyar wants the British-led, 4,800-strong International Security Assistance Force to be expanded to other cities before the indirect elections start in April, to protect people from harassment by warlords. The international community has still

not agreed to that.

The commission, however, believes it has a card up its sleeve to block the warlords. "The commission is empowered to reject those candidates it does not believe reflects the will of the people," says Qassimyar. "We will reject those candidates whose hands are bloodied."

But after 24 years of war in Afghanistan, the will of the people is likely to choose more than a few representatives with bloodied hands. And they won't all have national unity in mind: The loya jirga may establish an Afghan government, but peace will be harder to come by.

UN consultants admit the task is hard but they say the people's enthusiasm will do much to keep the warlords in check. Says one: "The people want this to work and that's the most important thing, because public pressure makes the warlords think twice about trying to impose their will."