

Civil Society Returns To Herat

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When US Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld flew into Herat for two hours last month to meet with Ismail Khan, the powerful warlord of western Afghanistan, he would have benefited greatly if he had also met with a small group of Afghan professionals and technocrats, who are determined to revive Afghanistan's civil society and reduce warlordism, as the country begins the lengthy process of reconstruction and reconciliation.

An extraordinary group of men and women, all with university degrees and the majority of whom hid out during the Taliban six years in power in Herat, have come together to form the Shura or Council of Professionals. The majority of them refused to leave Afghanistan and laid low in villages and farms when the Taliban shut down Herat University, schools, offices and refused to allow women to work.

"We want to develop civil society to get it out of the clutches of the warlords and bring Afghanistan into the modern era," said Mohammed Rafiq Shaheer, the elected President of the Shura.

The Shura is the first and most articulate manifestation of the reemergence of the Afghan middle class and it is an effort that should be replicated in other cities, if Afghanistan is to get out of political dependency of the warlords and economic dependency on hordes of Western consultants now arriving in the country to advise on reconstruction.

"The Herat professional Shura is an independent and non-political organization," says the charter of the group "One of the objectives is the rehabilitation of the war-torn country and reaching towards a developing society. This Shura has been established to restore human rights in Afghanistan with the full conformity of the Bonn Agreement," the Charter adds. The only criteria to become a member is that you have to have a university degree and adhere to the UN brokered Bonn agreement, which in December established the interim government in Kabul.

The Shura has ten separate associations under its umbrella which include associations of lawyers, economists, teachers, engineers, painters, calligraphers, poets, sportsmen" and even a group that promotes "Agriculture, Livestock and Veterinary Medicine." The Charter says that, "the Shura provides authorities and international aid agencies with professional consultations through its associations." However Shaheer says that so far no international aid agency except for the United Nations has consulted with them.

They have a love-hate relationship with Ismail Khan, the warlord of western Afghanistan even though several of his senior bureaucrats belong to the Shura. "Ismail is jealous of our knowledge and experience and the following we have," says a Shura member. A bureaucrat who has tried to arrange informal meetings between the Shura and Ismael Khan admits that it is difficult "convincing such warlords of the need for professional technocrats as advisers." The bureaucrat adds, "Ismail Khan does not accept our advice, he only accepts what the commanders say. He has become harsh and lost touch with the new reality." Says another educated adviser to Khan. "I am trying to push Khan to listen to the Shura because they are good people and they have good ideas, but its not easy."

Instead Ismail Khan's criteria for advisers is based on their warrior commitment and their Islamic ideology. "The government should be built on the merits of the Mujheddin (holy warriors) who resisted the Soviets and the Taliban," says Ismail Khan. "Many of those who want power never had a role in resisting the Taliban and I do not have anyone who can contest against me or my record of doing that," he adds.

The Shura publishes a monthly magazine called 'Takhassos' which means 'Experts' in Dari, the Afghan equivalent of Persian and it is packed full of how to revive Herat's schools, irrigation systems and repair bridges and roads. The magazine operates on a shoe string and has received one computer from the UN, although the Open Media for Afghanistan, a non-governmental organization will be supporting it.

In a town hall type meeting with the Shura and this correspondent, some 50 men and women gathered to discuss the role of the United States in present day Afghanistan. There was overwhelming support for the US intervention in dislodging the Taliban, but most expressed the fear that the US would once again walk away from Afghanistan once the terrorists of Al'Qaeda were mopped up.

"The US has helped us get rid of the Taliban and we are grateful and the US is now doing good things, but it should not abandon us when the fighting is over," said Shaheer. Several said that the warlords need to be better controlled "by more injections of Vitamin B-52 injections," - a reference to US air power. Others said that the US should now stop supporting the warlords with arms and money to find Al'Qaeda and do more for reconstruction.

But there were also feelings about the lack of nuance and political sensitivity shown by the Western alliance. "The US and UN role is more than the role that Afghans themselves have at the moment and that is not good," said a doctor. "This is our fault we were once strong, but now we feel inferior because foreigners are telling us what to do," he added. "The US is here because of its own interests and not Afghanistan's interests, it will get what it wants and then it will leave us to fend for ourselves," said a female literature professor at Herat university.

There was also overwhelming fear about Herat becoming stuck in the middle of the on going conflict between the US and Iran. "Herat could become the US-Iran battleground of the future and we are stuck in the middle, but we don't want interference from either," said a lawyer. "We can become a bridge between Iran and the US and provide a balance and make them become friends if we play our cards right," said another lawyer. The US has accused Iran of building up a support base in western Afghanistan and allowing Al'Qaeda and Taliban militants to escape to Iran. Both the Iranians and the Americans have a competing military presence in Herat, which Ismail Khan adroitly balances out.

There is no equivalent of the Shura in any other Afghan city, even the more sophisticated and cosmopolitan capital Kabul where the bulk of Western aid has so far been spent. If Afghanistan's professional middle class is to become an important player in the future and civil society is to be restored, both the Kabul regime and the international agencies need to do more to encourage the spread of such Shuras to other cities.