

# **CESR Op Ed: Stifled in the Loya Jirga, by Omar Zakhilwal**

## **(The Washington Post)**

**Kabul, Afghanistan** - I am a member of the loya jirga's silent majority -- or rather, silenced majority -- who came here to Afghanistan's capital expecting to shape our nation's future but instead find ourselves being dragged back into the past.

We came from all parts of the country to claim our freedom and democracy. Instead, we are being met with systematic threats and intimidation aimed at undermining our free choice. We came strengthened by international declarations on human rights, but now are facing international complicity in the denial of our rights. We came to represent the diverse interests of the entire Afghan nation, 1,500 delegates for 25 million people, but are being pressured to support the narrow agenda of warlords and their foreign sponsors. We came to inaugurate an inclusive and professional transitional government, but instead are being compelled to rubber-stamp the Bonn Agreement's unjust power-sharing arrangements.

The fundamental question we face is this: Will the new government be dominated by the same warlords and factional politics responsible for two decades of violence and impunity, or can we break with this legacy and begin to establish a system of law and professional governance?

The Afghan people have spoken clearly on this issue. I recently participated in a U.N.-commissioned assessment mission by the Center for Economic and Social Rights. Our report documents widespread agreement among all Afghans, from urban professionals to landless farmers, that there should be no role for warlords in the country's future, and that international aid will be wasted unless the underlying conditions of peace and security are first established.

The same consensus holds in the loya jirga. I estimate that at least 80 percent of delegates favor excluding all warlords from the government. The 200 women delegates are especially outspoken on this issue. In a spontaneous display of democracy, they publicly rebuked two powerful symbols of Afghanistan's violent past -- Burhanuddin Rabbani, president of the mujaheddin government from 1992 to '96, and Gen. Mohammed Fahim, former intelligence chief and currently defense minister in the interim government.

But because of behind-the-scenes pressure, our voices are being silenced and the warlords empowered. Let me give some concrete examples.

When the loya jirga opened, support for the former king, Mohammed Zahir Shah, was extremely strong. Rather than address the issue democratically, almost two days of the six-day loya jirga were wasted while a parade of high-level officials from the interim government, the United Nations and the United States visited Zahir Shah and eventually "persuaded" him to publicly renounce his political ambitions.

When the loya jirga recommenced, the delegates were surprised to be greeted by Afghanistan's 30 provincial governors, none of whom was elected to the grand assembly. It soon became apparent that their purpose was to serve as arm-twisters for the interim government, which is dominated by warlords from the Northern Alliance. These men controlled less than 10 percent of the country before the fall of the Taliban and therefore have little direct influence over most loya jirga members.

But the governors are able to leverage their local military and financial power to pressure delegates from their provinces to support hand-picked candidates allied to the Northern Alliance. At a gathering I attended, one governor made his threat explicit: "You are all with me. You will do what I tell you to do. If you dare disobey, we all go back to our province after this, don't we?" Such threats are enhanced by scores of Interior Ministry agents circulating throughout the loya jirga compound and openly intimidating outspoken delegates.

Equally discouraging is the role played by international organizations, especially considering our high expectations for their support on human rights issues. When I complained about our restricted role, a top U.N. political adviser told me in no uncertain terms that the loya jirga was not intended to bring about fundamental political change, such as ridding the government of warlords. Meanwhile, Zalmay Khalilzad, U.S. special envoy on Afghanistan, has caused disappointment in the loya jirga through pressure tactics to undermine popular support for Zahir Shah.

In reality, the loya jirga is being treated as a ratification tool for backroom political deals. As one example, the media have reported on the "voluntary" decision of Interior Minister Yonus Qanooni to drop his candidacy. But it is not being reported that he may become prime minister in the new government, or that his intended replacement is himself a member of Qanooni's Northern Alliance faction.

I asked a taxi driver what he thought of the loya jirga. The man shrugged his shoulders and pointed out the window at Kabul's ruined landscape: "The same people who destroyed these buildings are sitting in the front row of the loya jirga."

On the first day of the loya jirga, we were filled with hope and enthusiasm. Most of us stayed up past midnight in spirited debates about the country's future. By the third day, a palpable demoralization had set in. Our time is being wasted on trivial procedural matters. We feel manipulated and harassed. Our historic responsibility to the Afghan nation is becoming a charade.

We are in Kabul because we believe that participation and democracy are more than words on paper. We are not asking for much, after all: simply the right to determine our own government and future in accordance with the human rights ideals so loudly trumpeted by the international community -- the same rights as all other people.

*The writer, a professor of economics in Ottawa, Canada, co-authored a new human rights report on Afghanistan for the Center for Economic and Social Rights, a human rights group based in New York.*

The Washington Post  
Sunday, June 16, 2002