

Afghan Women Confront Warlords

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Females delegates at the Loya Jirga denounce Rabbani and his lieutenants for ravaging Afghanistan, in their first public encounter with the country's wartime leaders.

When Burhanuddin Rabbani came to the Loya Jirga tent on Monday night, he clearly wasn't prepared for what he got. The ex-president, whose supporters had declared him a candidate to become next head of state, was publicly assailed by a group of women delegates.

"Mr Rabbani why did you kill so many Afghans for the (presidential) chair? Why did you rape our daughters and sisters? Enough is enough," Tajor Kakar, a delegate said to him. The tenor of her remarks were reported by several independent witnesses.

Rabbani is a controversial figure among many Afghans because the period he was head of state witnessed some of the worst fighting and atrocities of Afghanistan's 23 years of war.

The group of women also openly confronted Defence Minister Mohammad Fahim, his deputy Abdul Rashid Dostum and Ustad Sayyaf, another well-known figure from Afghanistan's war against the Soviet occupation.

A couple of hours afterwards, Rabbani, who had only become known as a potential presidential candidate over the weekend, withdrew his candidacy.

There was no way to confirm whether there was a link between his withdrawal and the encounter with the group of women. But there is no doubt that the Loya Jirga is another step forward for women on the road to becoming a more vocal part of public life in Afghanistan.

Women can be seen outside the Loya Jirga compound forcefully articulating their views in interviews with journalists, many of them also Afghan women.

Three of the 21 members of the assembly commission are females. A few have been elected - including one in the remote central region of Bamiyan who got more votes than the local warlord - but most have been selected by the Loya Jirga organisers. There are believed to be nearly 200 among the 1600 delegates to the assembly.

Significantly, none of the television pictures of the opening ceremony inside the compound showed any female delegates in burqas, the head-to-toe covering compulsory for them under the Taleban. Instead, they were wearing the headscarves and loose dress that are common in many parts of the Muslim world.

Like many Pashtuns, Dr Shahida Hussain, from Kandahar, expressed scepticism over Monday's press conference in which the spokesman for the Pashtun former king announced he was not a candidate for any political role. "We will accept Karzai only if Zahir Shah comes and tell us that he can't run for the presidency and that he supports Karzai," she said.

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