

Afghanistan's Buzkashi Parliament

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A recent fight in the legislature leads some to wonder whether Afghanistan is ready for civilised discourse. Afghanistan's legislature appears to have taken on the aspect of the national sport, buzkashi – a colourful if brutal game which from the outside looks like a scrum of violent horsemen dragging around a headless goat carcass, intent on doing each other bodily harm.

The lawmakers seem to have been behaving much the same lately, minus the horses, of course. And with female deputies in place of the goat.

A scuffle last week in which a female deputy was attacked with water bottles and allegedly threatened with a knife shows that Afghanistan has a lot to learn about parliamentary procedure.

The fracas started during a budget debate on May 8. Haji Almas, a delegate from Parwan province and a prominent local militia commander, interrupted proceedings to complain about recent criticism of the mujahedin, the “holy warriors” who had just celebrated the 14th anniversary of their victory over the communist regime with great fanfare and ceremony.

The festivities sparked the usual grumbling from members of the public about the excesses of the civil war which followed the 1992 communist defeat, and which tore the country apart. They blame the mujahedin for wreaking untold destruction and killing thousands of their fellow countrymen.

But Haji Almas insisted that a few negative remarks should not be allowed to cast a shadow over the accomplishments of his fellow mujahedin commanders.

Haji Almas's tirade prompted an outburst from Malalai Joya, the young firebrand from Farah province who has been the scourge of the mujahedin since the Constitutional Loya Jirga in 2003, when she publicly called for warlords to be put on trial.

In parliament, she again lashed out at the mujahedin, saying, “There are two types of mujahedin - one who were really mujahed [holy warriors], and the second, those who killed tens of thousands of innocent people and who are criminals.”

At this, several members of parliament began hurling water bottles at her, and then rushed her. Several very unflattering terms were thrown at her along with the bottles – amounting to a grave insult in a conservative Muslim society.

Abdul Rabb Rasul Sayyaf, a prominent parliamentarian and former faction commander, reportedly said that describing the mujahedin as criminals should itself be a crime.

Joya later accused Sayyaf of calling for her to be attacked with a knife. She also claimed, in interviews widely quoted in the media, that some parliamentarians had called for her to be raped.

The incident was broadcast repeatedly on the popular Tolo TV, whose cameraman was struck by one of the enraged mujahedin turned politicians.

Afghanistan's parliament has more than its share of problems. Ethnic, linguistic and regional divisions create tensions within the body, and historical grievances make it difficult for various factions to sit under the same roof.

Now added to the mix is one of the most explosive and least tractable issues - gender. Women in parliament are more than a little upset with the men, especially the former mujahedin, whom they see as a misogynistic bunch intent on keeping them down.

"Men can say whatever they want in parliament," said Shukria Esakhel, a deputy from Baghlan province. "They don't give women a chance to speak. If a man had said [what Malalai did], there wouldn't have been a problem."

Malalai should, however, be a bit more circumspect, she advised.

"We can't say that all mujahedin are criminals" she said. "Lots of them fought for liberty, and now we have freedom in our country. But some of them were not real mujahedin; they destroyed houses and killed people. However, we should not bring these issues into parliament."

Still, nothing could justify the reaction that greeted Joya's statements, said Esakhel.

"I am very angry that they threw bottles at Malalai. It is as if they are throwing bottles at all Afghan women. It means they do not respect women."

Fatima Aziz, who represents Kunduz in northeastern Afghanistan, agreed.

"They have shamed themselves in front of the people," she said of the misbehaving members of parliament. "It is against our tradition and our constitution to throw things at women."

"The mujahedin are the source of the trouble in parliament."

This kind of talk is not likely to appease the former mujahedin, who are notoriously sensitive to criticism.

"If we are talking about crimes, then we should start with the communist regime," said Fazlullah Mojadeddi, a former governor and commander from Logar province who now sits in parliament. "When it comes to the mujahedin, I am the first to be prepared to answer for what I did."

"If anyone is talking about criminals, they should first talk about themselves and their families, and say

what they did during the jihad.”

Mojadeddi dismissed any suggestion that the ex-mujahedin were against women.

“I deny completely that the mujahedin are trying to keep women quiet,” he said angrily. “The mujahedin were 80 per cent of the Constitutional Loya Jirga, and they gave 68 seats in parliament to women.”

But Mojadeddi is bitter about those, like Malalai Joya, who air their grievances in public.

“There are people who just want to be famous,” he said. “When they see a television camera, they start saying things that are not true, just for their own purposes. Malalai is always saying things like that. We mujahedin think there are people on the outside telling her to say these things, so as to make us look bad.”

Other jihad-era leaders were more balanced.

“I am against both sides,” said Mustafa Qazemi. “I am a mujahed, but I cannot condone this kind of behaviour. There are those who are taking advantage of the name of jihad, and there are those who are taking advantage of the name of democracy.”

“We need a good culture in parliament, and we should not use it for our own ends.”

In a boost for Afghan reporters’ rights, Qazemi added, “As for the man who hit the Tolo journalist – anyone who hits a journalist is inhuman and has no brain.”

Malalai Joya has been defiant in the face of repeated threats. She told Tolo TV in an exclusive interview: “This is my voice, and I will continue for as long as I live.”

When asked whether she had proof of her allegations that the jihadi leaders were criminals, she grew heated.

“This is my message to them. The country is the proof, the people are the proof. Your hands are stained with blood,” she said. “My life itself is a history. War, crime and misfortune... women’s rights are being endangered. That is why I cannot sit quietly.”

The attack on parliament sparked a walkout of female members. On May 9, they boycotted the parliamentary session for several hours, until the speaker, Younus Qanuni, himself a prominent figure from the mujahedin era, apologised.

“There were about 30 or 40 of us,” said Shukria Paikan Ahmadi, a deputy from Kunduz. “The mujahedin are always intimidating us and we can’t say what we want. When one of the women was speaking, a commander from Herat told her to be quiet, otherwise they’d do to her what they did to Malalai.”

The boycott lasted for just a few hours, but the bitterness remains.

“The warlords are a majority in parliament,” said Ahmadi. “And even though they are all from different factions, in this they are together. They are all against us, against the women.”

Ahmadi described as “savage” the behaviour of those who attacked Joya and insisted that if there was a repetition, the women would take more drastic action.

“We cannot accept this,” she said. “We just do not have the patience. It would be better to leave parliament forever.”

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