

Assembly Captivates Kabulis

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Everyone has an opinion on the Loya Jirga - even those who harbour doubts are squeezing into cafes and restaurants to watch TV coverage.

As Afghanistan's first open political process for decades is played out across the airwaves, residents in the capital are either gripped, sceptical or bored by the events - but most remain hopeful of the outcome.

For five days, the country's few television sets have been tuned to live broadcasts from the Loya Jirga, while the majority of the population has been kept informed by radio.

Afghans who for years have been used to politics taking place either in secret or at the end of a gun have been treated to the spectacle of 1,650 people from all over the country debating and voting on the full range of issues that confront them - in public.

It is easy to see why many ordinary Afghans can hardly believe the process is for real.

When the management of Kabul's Biradaran Hotel showed the proceedings on television, the room was full to capacity and many people stood outside to hear the speeches.

Naqibullah from Loghar province sat at a table outside. "The Loya Jirga is amazing, but it won't solve our problems because it is pre-planned," he said.

At a restaurant nearby, more than 100 people watched as Ayatollah Asif Mohsini delivered a long speech on the role of religion in Afghanistan. "In its first two days, many more people came here than usual. We had to turn the TV off because they hadn't come to eat, but to watch the Loya Jirga," said Najeebullah, its owner.

But not everyone is interested in what is hoped will be a defining moment in Afghanistan's history.

Next to the restaurant, two ice cream saloons were showing Indian films to even bigger audiences, most aged under 20. Others were going about their business, seemingly uninterested in what was unfolding at the assembly.

The debates in the conference tent may be important, but many Afghans have more pressing problems - dealing with crime, for example, and trying to earn a decent living.

Four people sat at the Faizi cafe, south of Pul-e-Kheshti mosque, talking about the political process. "What has Karzai done so far? Today thieves robbed a taxi and killed the owner," said one.

Hasamuddin, a money exchanger in the Shahzada Saray district, said, "The Loya Jirga has not had any influence on the Afghan currency. It looks as if the process is not very valuable - or that someone has taken its value away."

Those who are interested in politics have strong opinions about what the process should achieve.

Sayed Najmuddin, originally from Panjsher valley and now selling mulberries near Zarnigar park, said he regularly listens to BBC broadcasts about the assembly. He and his neighbours would like the Jirga to elect a mujahedin authority because, he said, "we hate the western style of government".

Macroyan district taxi driver Gul Mohammad was listening to the conference debates on his car radio. "I like Karzai but not his cabinet because they don't know what work is," he told IWPR.

As Friday prayers started across the capital at lunchtime, the grand assembly cropped up in the sermons of preachers across the capital.

"The Loya Jirga should remove prejudice and stop warlords and cruel people from taking a seat in the upcoming state. Karzai should know the problems of our people, especially unemployment and starvation," said Abdurrahman Qarizada, an imam at Pul-e-Khishti mosque.

Only policeman Sayed Aqeel, who is so enthused by the grand assembly that he directs the Kabul traffic while holding a small radio to his ear, was uncritical. "I am happy that, after these decades, all Afghans are together to make plans for the future. We look forward to the decisions they will make," he said.

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