

Ex-king Backs Karzai Leadership Bid

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The US is suspected of playing a significant role in Zahir Shah's decision to withdraw his candidacy at this week's grand assembly.

In a dramatic last-minute intervention, former Afghan king Mohammad Zahir Shah has announced his support for Hamid Karzai to continue as head of government in the new administration to be appointed by the Emergency Loya Jirga.

In a written statement read before a packed Monday evening press conference at his Kabul residence, the ex-king confirmed that "I have no intention of restoring the monarchy and I am not a candidate for any position. . . . I fully support (Karzai's) candidacy".

Yet in a city buzzing with rumours about supposed back-room agreements, the manner in which the announcement was made only fuelled suspicions that a deal - with strong US involvement - had been done.

The statement - which clarified "confusion" created by press reports that the former monarch could even challenge Karzai for the pre-eminent position - was intended to set the stage for the Loya Jirga, which was intended to start this morning but was postponed specifically to clarify this issue.

Speculation over the role of the ex-king had been rife. Many Pashtun delegates declared support for him as head of state, and there was talk of a possible petition to be presented to the conference with hundreds of signatures, calling for an executive role for Zahir Shah .

The Loya Jirga appeared to be heading for a potentially major confrontation, which could complicate the more obvious deal-making over the various ministries.

While Karzai himself is also Pashtun, many of the latter see him as too close to the ethnic Tajic Panjshiris, who currently control the main power ministries. The former king, despite being 87 and in poor health, has been supported as a means to water down Panjshiri dominance.

In statements repeatedly broadcast on the BBC and other media, Zahir Shah confirmed that he would accept any position offered to him by the conference.

Yet the initial announcement drawing back from this position was made not at the royal residence but down the road a few hours earlier at the heavily guarded US embassy compound, by special presidential envoy Zalmay Khalilzad.

Confirming the delay in the proceedings, which had been scheduled to begin at 8.00 AM local time, the US official said, "One major reason for this postponement . . . is that statements.. indicated that the former king is or might be a candidate for the post of president. . . . Since these statements were inconsistent with earlier statements by the former king, it caused some consternation and confusion among the participants in the Loya Jirga."

As a result, he said, "the management of the Loya Jirga decided it would be prudent to delay 24 hours to ascertain the true position of the king."

Khalilzad was at pains to insist that the US had had no role in the announcement, and representatives of Zahir Shah also argued that the statement represented no change at all.

"We did not press him to withdraw, because he says he never made those statements (suggesting he would accept a candidacy)," Khalilzad said. "We have not exerted influence in any way."

But serious discussions have obviously been under way, and concern had been rising that without a pre-agreed settlement - especially between the rival Pashtun and Panjshiri factions - the direct participation of the ever increasing number of delegates (originally slated at 1,500 and now possibly pushing 1,700) could cause the exercise in direct democracy to spiral out of control.

Khalilzad confirmed that he had been at the king's residence on the eve of the conference, and had over the weekend visited Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah (one of the Panjshiris widely tipped for removal to placate the Pashtuns).

Journalists and others who had lingered around Zahir Shah's home confirmed that deep discussions about the ex-king's role had been under way. "They have been arguing over this all afternoon," said leading

Pakistani journalist and author Ahmed Rashid.

"The position today was a clear reversal," said Alexander Theiry of the International Crisis Group. "People have seen Afghan politics influenced so many times by outsiders. . . . This will lead to a suspicion that the agreement was made by the United States."

A Pashtun delegate lingering outside the royal residence was even more direct. "We are shattered. This is a step back from Afghan democracy, and we will have to decide what position we will now take."

Why the confusion could not have been clarified by a press release, or at the opening of the Loya Jirga itself, was unclear. "We wanted to make a very emphatic statement," said one of Zahir Shah's representatives.

By the former king's press conference, Khalilzad had returned, joined by the US ambassador, several members of the royal entourage, Abdullah Abdullah and Karzai. The statement was read by Zahir Shah political representatives, and Karzai expressed thanks for the support.

As the English-language portion was read confirming backing for Karzai, the Afghan leader clasped the ex-monarch's hand in a kindly squeeze. The latter was then quickly rushed back through heavy security without facing a single question.

Whether muzzling the ex-king in this way is worth the vigorous outburst that may be expected tomorrow from the floor from angry Pashtun delegates will be concluded over the coming days.

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