

Ex-King Opens Historic Assembly

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The former king, Zahir Shah, now known as the Father of the Nation, opened proceedings, wearing as he usually does a suit and necktie.

He called the delegates' attentions to their responsibilities in finalising a new constitution for Afghanistan.

Pir Sayed Ahmad Galani, leader of the Mahaz-i-Milli (National Front), was named as the temporary head of the Loya Jirga.

At the very front of the gathering sat the country's most powerful jihadi leaders and military commanders including Burhanudin Rabbani, Sabghatullah Mujdidi, Karim Khalili, Abdul Rashid Dostum and Abdulrub Rasool Saayaf.

There is an official ban on people with military forces, ministers, governors and high officials on being delegates at the assembly although there is provision for observer status.

At the last Loya Jirga in June 2002, the playing of the national anthem from the time of Rabanni's presidency - a Dari one - had proved a matter of great controversy but this time provoked little comment.

Choirs of children then sang in Dari and Pashtu, prompting some women to weep with emotion.

In a long speech, the head of the interim administration, Hamed Karzai, drew attention to the achievements of his administration.

"Two and a half million refugees have returned including national personalities and jihadi leaders. Our embassies are now re-established abroad and the international community has established missions in Kabul," he said.

"Afghanistan has got a stable national currency. At the time of the last Loya Jirga we didn't have any stable currency, 900 afghanis was equal to one Pakistani rupee and this year 100 afghanis equal 120 Pakistani rupees."

Karzai also emphasised the benefits of the presidential system - which is set to be a major point of debate at the gathering - saying that it promoted stability.

"We don't have strong national political parties which will get a big enough vote [for stability]. The small parties will have to make coalitions and that will not last long," he said.

As he spoke, the 500 delegates along with official observers and foreign dignitaries enthusiastically applauded several times.

There are representatives from around Afghanistan at the gathering – 450 elected and 50 chosen by Karzai himself – ranging in dress from Western jeans to jihadi pakools and traditional turbans.

The Constitutional Loya Jirga, stipulated by the Bonn Agreement, had earlier been scheduled for October but was then delayed until December 10 before being put off again at the last minute.

Authorities blamed the latest delays on technical problems and the late arrival of some delegates although there has been talk of behind-the-scene wheeler-dealing.

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