

## **Historic Loya Jirga Vote**

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Could election of grand assembly head represent first signs of the rebirth of democracy in Afghanistan?

Afghanistan held its first election for decades on Wednesday night, with delegates at the Loya Jirga appointing an assembly chairman after 14 hours of debate and a count that lasted well into the morning.

Mohammad Ismaeel Qassimyar, the chairman of the commission that convened the Loya Jirga, and the frontrunner for the post, was elected with 889 votes in a secret ballot. The official results did not give the number of votes for the challengers Azizullah Wassifi and Kazim Torah.

The post of assembly chair is an important one, especially because of the wide room for interpretation of Jirga regulations drawn up in Bonn. He is expected to have a good deal of influence over such questions as whether a single government slate will be presented or key ministers will be voted for post-by-post.

Altogether, there were 15 candidates for the post, but the number was whittled down to three when leading politicians saw the field was packed and they stood little chance of winning. Among those that withdrew was Abdul Rasool Sayaf, leader of Itihad-e-Islami Movement, and former president Sibghatullah Mojadedi.

The debate over who should head the Loya Jirga led the order of business after a ceremonial opening on Tuesday, a day late. Observers had expected it to be finished in a morning session. In the end, it went on all day, as delegates took their first chance in a generation to air views about just about anything that came to mind.

The debate occasionally reached fever pitch. "You are not working for Afghanistan but for the tribe, which is not fair," declared Hashmat Ghani Ahmadzai of Qassimyar.

Broadcast coverage was briefly cut as the session descended into uproar. Ahmadzai, who briefly put himself forward and then withdrew, also attacked a block vote exercised by Haj Abdel Qadeer over 148 delegates from four eastern provinces. Qadeer had told his group to give their votes to Qassimyar.

"This country is uneducated, but is not ignorant. Now a ten-year-old boy from this country can no longer be deceived. My vote is mine, and mine alone. And yet one person stands and gives votes to others," said Ahmadzai, referring to Qadeer.

Qasimyar, a Shiite Muslim from Herat province, is a supreme court judge who has served in the ministry of justice and other posts since the reign of Zahir Shah, which ended in 1973.

He has been criticised for being unable to control rowdy debates, and on Monday briefly provoked uproar when he appeared to state that applause for interim administration chairman Hamid Karzai meant he had been elected head of state. He later backtracked from those remarks.

But Qassimyar has an essential political asset for Afghanistan: although a native Dari speaker, he can also communicate in Pashto. "It is important for the chairman of the Loya Jirga to know both languages," said Haji Qadeer, adding that this was why he ordered his delegates to vote for him.

As well as the head of the Loya Jirga, voting also took place for his two deputies, and two members of the assembly's secretariat. There were 48 candidates for the former and 27 for the latter.

Vote counting was done by UN observers, supervised by Kabul university chancellor Mohammed Akbar Popal. One candidate, Fazil Mohammad Ibrahim, had his name removed by accident from the list of candidates for the deputy posts. Qasimyar apologised for the mistake to the Loya Jirga but it was too late to revoke.

Sima Samar, elected first deputy with 411 votes, is minister for women in the interim administration. A Hezara from Jaghori district of Ghazni province, she worked with many organisations while in exile in Pakistan. Mohammad Azam Dadfar, elected second deputy with 257 votes, is an Uzbek from the northern provinces of Afghanistan and a member of the Junbish-e-Milli party led by General Abdul Rashid Dostum.

The two secretaries are Pashtun intellectuals. One is Mohammad Ismail Yon, a young assistant professor in the Pashto department of Kabul university's literature faculty, is from the village of Niazi in the Alingar district of Laghman province. The other is Said Naeem Majroh from Konar province, the chief editor of Afghanistan magazine.

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**Location:** Pakistan  
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