

Jirga Puts Islam at Heart of Government

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The adoption of an Islamic moniker for the new administration reflects the lingering influence of the mujahedin.

The newly elected Afghan leader Hamed Karzai needs no lessons on the importance of Islam in his country's brave new world.

When Shi'ite Ayatollah Asif Muhsini called on the Loya Jirga to name the new government the Islamic Transitional State of Afghanistan, all delegates - Karzai foremost among them - immediately stood to signal their approval.

For all his familiarity and ease with western sensibilities - demonstrated time and again in news conferences and diplomatic tete-a-tetes - Karzai has shown convincingly that he understands his country's Islamic character and takes it very seriously.

This is just as well. Religious leaders and mujahedin have been centre stage at the grand assembly and the subject of Islam itself has popped up in debates on every conceivable topic since the Jirga opened five days ago.

Proof, if proof was needed, that the new administration must have the religion at its heart if it is to succeed.

The new name was opposed by only one delegate, Gul Agha Sherzai, who was immediately shouted down by his peers. "In the past 23 years the word Islamic has been abused, by the likes of the Taleban. I propose that it shouldn't be used so that no one can exploit it for their own ends," said Sherzai, who is known as a devout Muslim and mujahed from the time of the Soviet occupation.

Haji Qadeer, governor of Nangahar province, left Sherzai in no doubt of the assembly's mood. "I suggest you let the process go on, because the word Islamic has been unanimously agreed," he said.

Afghanistan's political turbulence down the years has been mirrored by many name changes.

Under Zahir Shah, the government was known simply as the Kingdom of Afghanistan. After the king was overthrown in 1973, the new president Daoud Khan pronounced it the Republic of Afghanistan, and when Afghan communists and then the Soviets seized power they referred to it as the People's Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.

With the arrival of the mujahedin in 1992, it was known as the Islamic State of Afghanistan. After the Taleban takeover, it became the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan; the student militia regarding words such as state and republic as irreligious. After their fall, the word Islamic was proposed for use in the title of the interim administration but this was not taken up.

The decision to do so now reflects the lingering influence of the mujahedin, but it's very unlikely that the ordinary people of Afghanistan will allow them to wield as much power as they once did.

Although most Afghans are devout Muslims, they have suffered under several governments who inflicted much pain in the name of their own, often very narrow, interpretations of the faith.

Still to be resolved, however, is what different people mean by the word

Islam.

Many female delegates spent the week arguing that it means full rights for women, including participation in the political process. One assembly member, Masouda Jalal, even stood for president and won a respectable 171 votes.

But some Afghan men have other ideas. Abdul Rahman Qarizada, who gave the Friday sermon at Pul-e-Khishti mosque in the middle of Kabul, told IWPR, "Islam doesn't give a woman the right to become president. There is a saying that if a woman becomes the head of a country, the men should go underground - meaning they should die. We are happy that she was not elected."

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