

Karzai Elected President

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As expected, Hamed Karzai has been elected head of Afghanistan's transitional government at the grand assembly.

The Loya Jirga on Thursday comprehensively endorsed Hamed Karzai as transitional head of state, with nearly 1300 delegates backing him in a secret ballot for the post. His closest rival, medical doctor Masouda Jalal, got just 171 votes.

The result was never in doubt. Jalal made an impressive speech but was only ever a spoiler candidate. She at least ensured that Karzai, who has made an international name for himself by running the interim administration since the fall of the Taleban, would not suffer the embarrassment of standing uncontested.

A third candidate, Mir Mohammad Nedaii, garnered 89 votes. There were six spoiled and six blank ballots. Abstentions were not officially announced, but going by Loya Jirga chief Ismail Qassimyar's estimate on Wednesday of 1650 voting delegates, there were 83.

"I hope Karzai succeeds in his job and works well for the country. I hope he helps the poor people of Afghanistan," said Qassimyar.

The audience rose to their feet and clapped rhythmically when they heard the result. "In the name of God. I am very proud that you all believe in me. It is a big burden. You trust in me as a poor Muslim that I will help the country. We pray for the people who died in this country," Karzai said in his victory speech.

Afghan radio broke transmission from the Jirga immediately after his address. After a few minutes of national music, a presenter announced, "All the journalists working at Kabul radio congratulate Mr Karzai and hope he will do a good job."

The debate and vote for the head of state was more orderly and shorter than the previous day's election of Qassimyar as assembly chief. The three candidates each spoke for 10 to 15 minutes.

Jalal, wearing a head scarf, elaborated a comprehensive programme which included elections every 18 months, equal rights for women, introducing computers into the country's wrecked education system and eradicating poppy production which fuels 70 per cent of the world's heroine trade.

But Karzai, who has over the past few months shown his mastery of international diplomacy, has also this week proved to be an adept and confident public speaker, presenting himself as both the man who has put Afghanistan on the world map and can unite the country's complex mosaic of ethnic groups and ideologies.

The only other known political leader to have formally thrown his hat into

the ring was ex-president Burhanuddin Rabbani. But he withdrew on Monday, shortly after having been heckled by a group of women delegates upset by the bloodshed during his 1992-96 term in office.

"We should differentiate between mujahedin and warlords. The mujahedin saved the country. The warlords destroyed our homes," Karzai said in his election address earlier in the day. Dressed in a traditional Pashtun headdress, he added, "We will defend our freedom and our country with our blood."

This is the kind of talk designed to appeal to many ordinary Afghans. So was his careful distinction between ulema, the traditional religious classes, and the religious extremism of the Taleban, together with the repeated mention of Afghanistan's martyrs, Ahmed Shah Massoud, the late leader of the Northern Alliance, and Abdul Haq, a Pashtun mujahed commander killed by the Taleban last year.

Karzai emphasised, as he did on the opening day, the fact that Afghanistan has become part of the international community under his stewardship.

"I want to have good relations with all countries, especially with those who were interfering in our internal affairs like Pakistan and Iran," he said.

He talked of foreign investment, particularly an oil pipeline to run from Turkmanistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan, which would net the country 300 million US dollars a year.

Significantly, Karzai has avoided prominent mention of America in

his four speeches to the Loya Jirga. Ex-king Zahir Shah's decision not to stand for political office and his endorsement of Karzai had been controversial, particularly among Pashtuns - the country's largest ethnic group - because it was announced by US diplomat Zalmay Khalilzad.

The significant remaining business of the Loya Jirga is to approve the structure and major personalities of the government - the "power ministries" of defence, home and foreign affairs. It is unclear from the rules of the grand assembly whether this will happen as a single "slate" presented by Karzai or delegates will get the chance to vote on ministers one by one.

Earlier in the week, it had briefly seemed as though there would be no election at all after Qassimyar announced at a news conference that the audience's applause for Karzai on the opening day in his view constituted an endorsement of his presidency.

Both delegates on the floor and international diplomats expressed their disquiet and Loya Jirga commission officials soon amended their position to say that it was only Karzai's candidature that had been approved.

This report was compiled by IWPR trainees Mir Enyatullah Saada, Hafizullah Gardesh, Samander Khan, Daneesh Kerokhil and Abdel Wali.

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