

Loya Jirga Falls into Disarray

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Disputes over a national language and the national anthem leads to the final vote on the constitution being put off yet again.

The Constitutional Loya Jirga came close to complete breakdown on Wednesday, with the leadership in disarray and an attempt at reconciliation ending in failure.

In the morning, the elected Loya Jirga leaders walked out on chairman Sibghatullah Mujaddidi, leaving him to manage the problems by himself. A committee that Mujaddidi formed to resolve problems dissolved into name-calling. And a key alliance between major factions has apparently broken up along ethnic lines.

The entire gathering was finally called into session around 6 p.m. but because several dozen delegates were absent, the leadership said that the final vote on the 32 articles of the constitution still in contention would be put off until Thursday.

Wednesday morning, a special committee was formed that included three representatives from each province and leaders of the 10 working committees in an attempt to resolve the main points of contention.

Mujaddidi called the meeting, but Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, leader of the Ittehad-e-Islami party and a major figure among jihadis, acted as a mediator.

The committee did discuss some of the key issues, such as the powers of the president, and Sayyaf suggested several possible compromises.

But the meeting erupted into shouting matches over the emotional issue of the national anthem and national language, according to delegates who took part in the meeting.

When several Pashtuns insisted that Pashtu should be added to the constitution as the national language, other delegates began shouting and calling the Pashtuns "filthy and wicked", according to Shahida Hussein, one of the delegates who was in the meeting. Several other delegates in the meeting confirmed her account.

The meeting deteriorated from there. In the end, nothing was resolved and the committee broke up.

Charan Singh, a Hindu delegate who was in the meeting, said that "those who created chaos are in the minority. The majority had wise suggestions."

Some delegates have been resisting the final vote, claiming that the process revision the draft constitution was flawed and that the final document fails to reflect their demands.

But other delegates – many of them Pashtuns – were pushing for a vote. There were some indications that these delegates have united along ethnic lines and, since they have a majority among the 502 delegates,

would win on key issues.

Ghulam Faruq Khpalwak, a Pashtun delegate from Balkh province, told IWPR, "We Pashtuns will not be satisfied without a vote. If we win or they win, this is the only solution."

The current dispute centers on the national anthem and the national language, delegates told IWPR.

Pashtuns had wanted their language enshrined in the constitution as the national language, but the original draft made no mention of a national language. Dari and Pashtu are the official languages, to be used in government communications.

The original draft of the constitution had said that the national anthem would be in Pashtu, but a revision altered this article to include the phrase "Allahu Akbar" – the jihadi rallying cry – and the names of all the ethnic groups of Afghanistan.

Delegates said some Pashtun members had at first been opposed to the strong presidential system outlined in the original draft constitution. On this question, and on the issue of strengthening the role of Islam in government, these delegates had been united with jihadi leaders – many of the latter being Tajiks from the Northern Alliance.

However, when the non-Pashtun jihadi leaders began to tinker with the national anthem and objected to Pashtu being named the national language, the Pashtuns felt that these leaders were working against them. Consequently, they decided to back a strong presidential system.

Paktia delegate Fazal Rahman Samkani agreed that Pashtuns had originally, in the name of Islam, joined with jihadi leaders in supporting a parliamentary system.

However, "Pashtuns know that the situation is going differently now," he said. The language and anthem issues had split things along ethnic lines. "Speaking in the name of Islam has gone out of fashion," he said. "Because of that, the absolute majority of Pashtuns are in favor of the presidential system."

President Hamed Karzai called a press conference on Wednesday morning to defend the creation of a strong presidential system, saying it was the only way to avoid partisan bickering in any future government.

Parliamentary systems are often accused of leading to unstable governments because coalitions among various political parties – sometimes controlled by small, marginal groups – are frequently necessary to win the passage of important legislation.

Karzai also said that he has stayed out of the Loya Jirga process, despite accusations that he has interfered in the process. "Anything that is good for the nation of Afghanistan, and any suggestions that come to me for the good of the nation of Afghanistan, that is also my choice," the president said.

Wednesday was a day filled with tension and rumours. Various factions accused each other of interference and forgery in balloting and of powerful people exerting pressure and influence.

Safia Siddiqi, a deputy chair and spokeswoman for the assembly, said there was interference from all sides. "This is out of our control, and we are not doing anything now," she said after she and other leadership walked out of the main hall Wednesday morning.

Other members of the assembly's leadership said they had walked out because the session had descended into chaos. Some blamed Mujaddidi for not exerting greater control over the gathering.

IWPR journalists Danish Karokhel, Wahidullah Amani, Ezatullah Zawab, Mashal Aziz, Baabak Quyum, Rahimullah Samander and Bashir Gwakh contributed to this report, which is part of IWPR's Loya Jirga reporting project.

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