

Massouda Jalal: Physician Talks Up Her Neutrality

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Massouda Jalal touts her independence as solution to the country's problems.

Massouda Jalal says the outcome of Saturday's presidential vote is a litmus test for a state of democracy in Afghanistan.

"If the elections are free and fair, I will have the most popular support, because I am an independent candidate and don't have ties with any political movement," she said.

"But if the elections are undermined by deals between political organisations, the presence of weapons, or the money and influence of foreign governments, then I won't get anything and I won't win."

Jalal is the only woman among the 18 candidates vying for the presidency. Despite having no prior political experience, she came in second to the incumbent president, Hamed Karzai, during the selection of an interim president at an emergency Loya Jirga in 2002.

She touts her independence as the solution to the country's problems.

"I am not anyone's enemy," she said in an interview with IWPR. "I never fought with anyone before and I won't now. I neither have ties to any political organisation, nor do I have a political party."

Born in 1963 to an educated family, she grew up in Kabul and graduated from medical school in 1988. She started her medical career in 1989 at a psychiatric hospital. In 1996, she joined the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and subsequently worked as a health consultant for the World Food Programme.

While Jalal says she barely has enough money to finance her campaign, her large, colourful posters can be seen all over Kabul.

She's also travelled extensively around the country. "I travelled to 21 provinces during the campaign, and I never been threatened," she said.

Jalal is running on a platform of respect for Islamic law and implementation of the constitution while advancing reform of the judicial and administrative system.

She also pledged to push for national unity, a notable promise given that many of the other candidates are drawing on the support of various political and ethnic groups as their main weapon in the electoral battle.

Vowing to "bridge the gap between the people and the government", Jalal said she would appoint a government that represented all segments of Afghan society.

"I will try to involve members of all political, tribal and religious groups, each according to their intelligence

and capability," she said.

While Jalal admits that, as a doctor, she doesn't have much political experience, she said she would bring the right people into government.

"I will have intellectual and experienced people in my government," she said.

Women's rights are also important part of Jalal's platform. She said that her government would provide educational and healthcare facilities for women and pledged to bring accomplished and educated women into her government.

Jalal also had strong words over the failure of the Karzai administration to rein in powerful local commanders. And she said the UN-led Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration programme, DDR, has been too slow in taking guns out of the hands of the warlords.

"The period of transitional government is over, but the generals are still in power," she said. "The president isn't elected by people: various groups formed alliances and the power is distributed between them. This transitional state has caused an increase in corruption and drugs trafficking. The DDR process hasn't been run successful and has not been implemented in time for elections."

Lack of progress on disarmament is also an impediment to establishing a central government, she said. It has also created security concerns for the upcoming elections, which, according to Jalal, are the best chance for the people of Afghanistan to live free of the fear of violence.

"Groups shouldn't fight for power and political posts, and should unite to ensure security," she said. "I promise, if I win the elections, I won't let anyone threaten peace and security in Afghanistan."

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