

Pro-Constitution Demos

Author: [ezatullah.zawab](#).

During the first few sessions of the Constitutional Loya Jirga in Kabul, last Tuesday and Wednesday, Jalalabad's streets filled with the protesters and Nangarhar University students blocked the Kabul-Jalalabad.

The demonstrators had several issues on their agenda, including support for the draft constitution's strong central government and presidential system and making the national anthem Pashtu.

Students from Balkh University and residents of Mazar-e-Sharif had held protests last month against the draft, venting their opposition to centralisation, calling for the national anthem to be in Uzbek and Dari as well as Pashtu, and that Uzbek be made an official language.

Dari and Pashtu are the official languages, used in all government communications.

The one thing that demonstrators in both cities agreed on was that the constitution should specify free higher education Afghans.

Students have not been required to pay for university education, but the current draft does not mention this as a right, leading many to speculate that fees will be brought in next year.

Three high school students told IWPR that the Tuesday demonstration in Jalalabad was organised by local education department administrators.

Sahibullah, a Nangarhar high school 12th grade student, said they had the permission of the education department, because "the principal came to the classes and explained the plan of the demonstration, and after this with one voice 2,000 students came out to the roads".

But the principal denied involvement in the protest.

One teacher who took part in the rally, Mukhtar, 53, said it was appropriate because, he claimed, the Loya Jirga authority is in the hands of the Northern Alliance who are imposing their beliefs on some delegates and damaging national unity.

University students took up the protests on Wednesday.

A demonstrator from that day, Muhasil Khan Ghamsharik, a student of Nangarhar University's education department, said that they delivered a resolution to UNAMA, the independent human rights commission, the regional constitutional secretariat and the governor's office. "The governor's office and UNAMA assured us that our requests would be sent to Karzai and Loya Jirga delegates this evening [Wednesday]," said Ghamsharik.

Dr Farooq Wardak, head of the secretariat for the constitutional commission, said Sunday that the resolution had been received Friday and distributed to delegates Saturday.

In addition to the support of Pashtu, free higher education and a presidential system, the resolution asked that the term Afghan used in the constitution should not be replaced by Afghanistani, as some northerners have requested.

The term Afghan first came into official use under Ahmad Shah Durrani at the beginning of 250 years of Pashtun rule, so some non-Pashtuns object to it as being a Pashtun term. Afghanistani means Afghan citizen.

On Tuesday, there was an explosion in front of the Radio Television Afghanistan building where demonstrators were gathered. Glass shattered but no injuries were reported.

One protester accused the Northern Alliance of setting the bomb off to frighten the demonstrators. But Nangarhar police headquarters spokesman, Major Zalmai, said officers detonated the explosive because they could not defuse it, and claimed that it had been planted by the Taleban and al-Qaeda.

Ezatullah Zawab is an independent journalist.

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