

A Royalist in the Presidential Race

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Dr Abdul Satar Sirat, a former adviser to King Zahir Shar and an Islamic scholar, is campaigning as a symbol of national unity.

A man who served as adviser of King Zahir Shah, and who nearly became interim president of Afghanistan at the Bonn conference of 2001, is now viewed as one of the top contenders in the October 9 presidential race.

Dr Abdul Satar Sirat, 67, a highly educated Islamic scholar and former justice minister, portrays himself as a symbol of national unity.

His close ties to the king, which were highly evident in the 1970s, have led some elder Afghans to nostalgically hark back to the more peaceful days before the emergence of the Communist regime and the subsequent years of bitter factional fighting.

He has returned after three years in the United States to challenge President Hamed Karzai and 16 other candidates, in the country's first election for the presidency.

Haji Salih Mohammed Kamrani, Sirat's campaign assistant, outlines his key policy priorities as "bringing national unity and an improvement in the economy.

"Sirat is going to end discrimination and build a united Afghanistan, provide shelters for returnees and support the disabled and surviving relatives of shahada [people who died in the fight against the Soviets]."

Sirat is president and founder of the Hizb-e-Harakat-e-Wahdat-e-Milli, National Unity Party of Afghanistan. He first came to international prominence when he presided over the royalist faction at the Bonn conference that established an interim government for Afghanistan following the ousting of the Taleban.

Many observers believed that Sirat, an ethnic Uzbek, who had served as an advisor to the king for three decades, had the support of both the royalist faction and the Northern Alliance commanders who had fought with the United States-led Coalition against the Taleban.

But he ultimately lost out to Karzai, who had the support of the US, despite rumours that he had won 11 of the 13 delegates' votes.

Despite having spent 26 years in Saudi Arabia, he maintained his strong relationship with the king of Afghanistan. From 1975 to 1999, he was a lecturer in Islamic studies in Um-al-Qura University in Riyadh and was special advisor to the king.

His supporters say that during this time abroad, he remained committed to his country. Alhaj Nasrullah Barezai, the director of Wahdat-e-Milli-ye- Aqwam-e-Afghanistan, the National Union of Tribes of Afghanistan, credits him as being a great fundraiser.

"Sirat was called the uncle of jihad because all leaders were looking to his funds and the money he collected for them," said Barekzai. "This title was given [to him] by Muhammad Nabi Muhammadi [one of the leaders of the mujahedin]."

Sirat's father was an Uzbek farmer in the province of Samangan in northern Afghanistan. He went to primary and middle schools in his local home province.

He attended high school in Paghman, a district of Kabul, and went on to study at the Shariat faculty of Kabul university.

He completed a master's degree in Egypt at al-Azhar university and won a scholarship to complete a PhD in Um-al-Qura.

From 1960 to 1969, he was the assistant head of the Shariat Faculty of Kabul university and from 1969 to 1971 he worked as minister of justice and attorney general.

He has written 12 books in the fields of Islam and politics and writes in several different languages, including English, Arabic, Dari and French.

Appearing recently on Afghan television, Sirat made a stinging critique of US policy. "Afghanistan became a priority for the West and the US on only two occasions," he said.

"First, when the Russian Red Army attacked Afghan territory and international communism destroyed the independence of Afghanistan. Then Afghanistan's situation attracted the attention of the world and [it] became an international issue. Then our situation became the first priority for America....," he said.

He accused the West of then ignoring Afghanistan for another 10 years and failing to act after the Soviets withdrew from the country - until the events of September 11 once again put the country at the centre of the international stage.

While some observers rate Sirat high among the presidential contenders, others are sceptical about his chances, in part because of the long period he has spent abroad.

He has two sons, one of whom is a doctor in Germany; another who has been living in Norway.

Zahoor Afghan, managing director of Erada daily newspaper, said, "Sirat has been to Afghanistan for two days and the affairs he is aware of are the ones he has heard, not witnessed.

"Sirat doesn't stand for the unity of Afghanistan, but for its partition. He is the symbol of hypocrisy."

Those who dispute Sirat's claim to stand for national unity point to his links with another Uzbek candidate – the commander General Abdul Rashid Dostum. Dostum has in the past advocated federalism for Afghanistan, but some view his aim as outright secession for the Uzbek north of the country.

On the streets of the capital, his candidacy receives a mixed response.

"I didn't know of Sirat before [the elections]. I heard [about him now] through the radio and TV," said Qadam Ali. "Sirat has not done any service to the Afghan people. He [lived abroad so long that he] is a emigre and no one will vote for him."

But Habibullah, originally from the northern province of Takhar, said that "Sirat is a knowledgeable person and is able to lead any government well."

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Location: [Afghanistan](#)

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