

Sayed Ishaq Gailani: Ex-Mujahedin With Moderate Views

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Former guerrilla leader survived Taleban death threats to stand in the current election.

Sayed Ishaq Gailani is a political survivor - he fought in the war against Soviet occupation, escaped Taleban death threats, and now put himself up for election as president.

He said he was resigned to losing the election, but still believes he enjoys a lot of support around the country.

Gailani comes from a family that enjoys considerable prestige in Afghanistan as hereditary leaders of a Sufi sect, the Qadiriya. He also has a history of opposing first the Russians and then the Taleban.

He told IWPR he's disappointed with the lack of progress in Afghanistan since an interim government was installed in December 2001, saying the initial optimism has been replaced by a sense of stagnation.

"It's in order to rescue the country from this situation that I have nominated myself for the presidency," he said.

The candidate heads the National Solidarity Movement, a political grouping established in 2002 in Peshawar, Pakistan, as an anti-Taleban coalition of some 40 groups, and now a recognised party in Afghanistan.

Gailani said all of Afghanistan's ethnic groups need to work together if governance is to be effective, "Afghanistan needs national reconciliation, people in Afghanistan must draw closer together, the religious prejudices fostered by foreigners must be curbed so that Afghans become united as one Afghan."

As a man whose wife, Fatana, runs a women's non-governmental organisation, he supports equal rights for women in public life, education, and all other areas, "If a person has merit, the work must be entrusted to them, whether they are a man or a woman."

He supports continued disarmament of Afghanistan's armed factions, and says he would apply legal and even military pressure to compel people to comply.

For the moment, international forces are needed, but "under a future government, once our national military and police forces have been formed, I will ask them to leave Afghanistan", he said.

Gailani said he himself feels safe wherever he goes in Afghanistan. But he complained that the election campaign was an unequal fight.

He admits indirectly that he will be defeated by the incumbent, President Hamed Karzai, largely because of the support the latter is getting from abroad, particularly the United States.

"The election has been made for one person, and he will be the winner," he said. "This is the injustice of the election process: I use an old jeep when I go out to the provinces, whereas Mr Karzai travels by helicopter. I spend my own money, while the ministry for border affairs, governors and district administration chiefs are campaigning for him.... Whenever there are so many opportunities in one person's hands, for sure there will be pressure."

But in a surprise move, Gailani announced on Wednesday that he was withdrawing from the race. Although his name will still appear on the ballot, he urged his supporters for vote of Karzai instead.

Earlier in the campaign, Gailani had suggested the important thing was to win a moral victory, "In my opinion, the winner will be the one who goes to every province and is received warmly by the people - men and women show respect for him - regardless of whether he wins or loses."

Kabir Ranjbar, head of the Lawyer's Association of Afghanistan, said he saw Gailani as a progressive. However, even the respect he enjoys as a religious figure would not have played a decisive role in the election, said Ranjbar.

"The spiritual role he plays is limited, and the issue of ethnicity is more important to many people," he said.

Gailani is the son of Qadiriya leader Sayed Ali Gailani, who died in 1964. He was born in Kabul in 1955, and after attending local schools he went to Iran where he obtained a degree in law and political science in 1975.

He fled Afghanistan after the communist coup of 1978, and joined the mujahedin based in Pakistan, fighting on until the Russians withdrew in 1986. Initially he was part of the Mahaz-e-Milli faction led by his uncle, Pir Sayed Ahmad Gailani, but he left the group in 1984 because, he says, some members were diverting money intended for the jihad for their own personal use.

After 1992, when the mujahedin were in power, he steered clear of politics because he wanted no part in the vicious internecine strife between various armed factions.

When the Taleban took power, Gailani spent six years in Pakistan living in fear of his life, apparently because he had issued a statement condemning the Islamic militia. On seven occasions, hit-men dispatched by the Taleban were intercepted and arrested.

"The worst time in our life was the six years that I spent as a prisoner in my own home," he recalled, noting that his daughter was prevented from going to school because the whole family felt threatened.

"On a list the Taleban drew up of people to be killed, my name and that of my wife Fatana were at the top."

Now Gailani has been facing hostility of a different kind. His campaign posters have been torn off the walls - as is the case with other candidates.

His spokesman, Abdur Rahman Nesar, thinks the vandalism is organised rather than the action of isolated individuals. He told IWPR, "Two weeks ago, our people noticed that during the night, police were removing Gailani posters. In some places they were sticking Qanuni's posters on top of Gailani's."

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