

Strong Central Government Urged

Author: [IWPR](#)

By Qais Faqiri, Hasina Rasuli and Qayoum Babak in Kabul (ARR No. 86, 16-Dec-03)

Delegates who want strong central government for the country are likely to win the day, according to analysts.

A fierce debate has been going on for months about whether the draft constitution for the country should propose powerful central government - or a system that devolves powers to the regions.

The draft constitution does not explain the powers and duties of provincial authorities in the future government, which has raised concerns amongst delegates from the regions - particularly from the north.

Those who favour a strong central government say this is necessary to hold Afghanistan together and to drive through policies to reconstruct the country after 23 years of war. Powerful government, they say, is also better able to impose security.

But campaigners for a federal system say devolving responsibilities to the regions will bring power closer to the people, and make government more responsive to their needs. They say that over-strong government could paradoxically lead to the break-up of Afghanistan.

Ahmad Shah Asar, editor of Bamdad newspaper in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif, said, 'Afghanistan is in political crisis right now. Federalism does not have much chance of success because to get out of this crisis the country needs strong government - and the majority of delegates see it that way.'

But the debate is going on at the Loya Jirga, which is discussing the draft constitution drawn up by a special commission.

Habib Ullah Rafi, a specialist in Afghan affairs at the Academy of Science in Kabul, said that Afghanistan had been weakened by the years of war, and even after two years of stability it needed powerful central government to rebuild the country.

"If we propose federalism in Afghanistan then balanced development cannot be achieved because the incomes in parts of the country are not equal", said Rafi.

Giving more power to the provinces would create more distance between the centre and the provinces - and it was important to avoid this. But he said that, as the quality of government improved, more powers should be given to the provinces.

Fazil Rahman Urea, editor of the Kabul weekly newspaper Mashaal Democracy, said, 'We are opposed to federalism in Afghanistan, because from the political and economic point of view, it takes us a step back.'

"We need a strong central government that is able to deal with the war lords", he said.

But those demanding a federal structure have continued their rearguard campaign.

Last month in Mazar-e-Sharif, university students made of different ethnic groups - Uzbeks, Hazaras and Tajiks - demonstrated in favour of more powers for the regions, especially the northern provinces.

Maria Sazawar, a delegate from Mazar to the Loya Jirga, supports calls for a federal structure of government.

“The provinces we live in and the people we represent here want to have their own authority”, she said.

Sazawar said it was still not clear why the idea of federalism was dropped in the draft constitution. But she said that if the reason was not clearly explained in the Loya Jirga ‘we will not remain quiet.’

Faiz Ullah Zaki, a spokesman for Junbish-e-Millie - one of the main parties in the north - and also a delegate to the Loya Jirga, said that not only the north but delegates from other provinces wanted federalism.

He said, “I can’t anticipate what will happen, but I will raise the issue during the Loya Jirga”.

Qais Faqiri, Hasina Rasuli and Qayoum Babak are participating in IWPR’s Loya Jirga reporting project.

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