

Villagers: High Hopes but Few Specifics

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There is no doctor in her village, Bakhtyar, to treat its several thousand residents. The nearest health clinic is 12 kilometers away. That's why Kamila believes "the Loya Jirga should give rights to women and build schools so that our daughters will become doctors".

Like thousands of other villagers - even those who live relatively close to Kabul - Kamila doesn't really know what the current national convention is doing. But many have vague hopes of practical changes a new constitution might bring.

Loya Jirga is a familiar term to Afghans because it's been used some 300 years. They've heard about the current gathering on the radio. Still, most of those interviewed by IWRP in seven villages around Kabul knew little of substance about the proceedings.

One common misperception is that a president is being chosen at this meeting. That's probably because the selection of a president was the main news from the Emergency Loya Jirga of June 2002.

The Constitution Commission solicited opinions from 150,000 citizens in 523 gatherings around the country while the document was being drafted last summer. They specifically invited mullahs and elders from the villages, intending that these leaders would in turn educate their villagers, said Abdul Ghafor Liwal, spokesman for the commission.

There were also radio programmes, a magazine and posters explaining the constitution, Liwal said.

But the draft constitution itself wasn't published until the beginning of November, giving little opportunity for it to be read and for convention delegates to get reactions from average citizens. There has been no public education process since about 150,000 copies of the draft document were distributed, other than for media accounts on the sessions.

Liwal said they will distribute new copies of the constitution once it received final approval.

Even in the best of circumstances, it would be difficult to educate the citizenry, given that many live in Afghanistan's thousands of far-flung villages. In addition, 70 per cent of the country's population is illiterate.

It's not surprising, then, that the average villager has only a vague sense of what the current proceeding really means. But they do have a general hope that the session will help solve their major problems, especially in the areas of health care, education and jobs.

On the bus to Khak-e-Jabar district east of Kabul, passengers tossed around the idea that the the current meeting would affect prices. They made fun of one passenger who had just bought three sacks of flour: "You shouldn't have bought a lot of flour, it will get cheaper after the Loya Jirga," they advised him.

Some simply have a low opinion of the gathering. Zarifa, 33, who lives in Paiminar village about 25 kilometers north of Kabul, has been listening to the proceedings on the radio. She said she is fed up with the delegates wasting time by speaking on issues other than the constitution.

Her five children haven't been able to get an education because there are no schools close to where she lives. "In the Loya Jirga, I haven't heard anything that will brighten the future of our country," she said.

Education was also a concern for Latifa, a 22-year-old resident of Char Asiab, south of Kabul. She wants the constitution to ensure that girls have the right to attend schools. "Our father and brothers prevent us from going to school because they think that Talebs or other groups will kill them," she said.

The constitution draft makes elementary education compulsory for all children.

Riza Gul, 50, lives in Bandikhana, about 30 kilometers outside Kabul. She said she hadn't heard anything about the constitution. "People say that there is a jirga in the city, and that [President Hamed] Karzai will again become president," she said. Her main concern is to see more jobs created for young people "so they will not create problems for the government", she said.

Many villagers did say they're supportive of Malalai Joya, the 25-year-old delegate from Farah province who caused an uproar last week when she called jihadi leaders "criminals" and said some of them shouldn't be in the Loya Jirga.

Haji Naim, 44, said the meeting "should create a court in which all warlords who destroyed the country should be put on trial."

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