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Afghanistan without Political Parties

Can the New Parliament Function?

Citha D. Maass

The conference on the finalisation of international aid schemes for developing institutions in Afghanistan in the context of the Afghanistan Compact, a five-year framework plan, ended on 1 February in London. The Afghan parliament, which was formed in December 2005, will certainly be a crucial institution for the country's political future. At the same time, however, the nature of the parliament reveals the risks inherent in the country's political development. The future progress of the current political process is called into question by fundamental structural deficits, such as the absence of political parties. The efficiency of the Afghan parliament will probably be limited by its extremely fragmented nature, by power struggles between individual leading personalities, and by the tendency of its delegates to form systems of patronage based on personal loyalties.

Now that a few weeks have gone by since the formation of the Afghan parliament on 19 December 2005, it is possible to draw some preliminary conclusions about its mode of operation and its development perspectives. These are co-determined partly by international reconstruction aid, which was renegotiated at the conference in London.

In the evaluation of the Bonn Process, the parliamentary elections of 18 September 2005—which were unexpectedly peaceful—and the opening of the two chambers of the Afghan parliament (*Wolesi Jirga* = Lower House, and *Meshrano Jirga* = Upper House) are being counted as successful stages in the introduction of democracy in Afghanistan. However, one should not

overlook the grave deficiencies in the measures that have been taken thus far to set up a political system in Afghanistan. Like the presidential elections on 9 October 2004, the parliamentary elections too were dogged by irregularities. Moreover, the new parliament lacks the structure that is typical of western multiparty democracies. Thus provisional assessments must be made with caution. While a *political* process was begun, there is some doubt as to whether the process qualifies as *democratic* by the standards of the western donors.

Controversy over electoral system and party-free electoral code

These doubts are intensified by two inter-related controversies in the run-up to the parliamentary elections: The disputed electoral system and the preference for independent candidates. President Karzai prevailed in both questions, with clear support from the then American ambassador, the highly influential Zalmay Khalilzad. Khalilzad was reluctant to see the power of the US-supported Afghan president weakened by a strong legislature.

For months during the controversy over the electoral system, the EU members and international experts argued for a variant of a list-based proportional voting system. However, Karzai decided on the Single Non-Transferable Vote System (SNTV), a simple majority vote system. At the same time, the president refused to conduct party-based elections in accordance with the recommendations of the UN and the EU. He prevented candidates from stating their party affiliation on the ballot papers and repeatedly encouraged men and women with an interest in politics to run as independent candidates.

The consequence of these two decisions is that the political forces in the parliament lack a functional structure, as the 249 independent delegates of the *Wolesi Jirga* and the 102 senators of the *Meshrano Jirga* are not organised into parliamentary groups.

Hostility to parties and the danger of a patronage system

Precisely because Karzai is so strongly championed by the international community as the symbol of a “new democratic beginning” in Afghanistan, one must ask why he so vehemently opposes the concept of political parties, which represents the basis of the parliamentary system in western democracies. There are three possible explanations: Election tactics; the desire to keep several options open; and a fundamental power preservation strategy.

There is no doubt that, in the election campaign, tactical considerations prompted Karzai to exploit the widespread hostility to parties and even to incite further hostility. One of the effects of the war with its multiple regime changes was to discredit all political parties in the eyes of the population. This applies not only to the present-day organisations which succeeded the formerly ideologically oriented communist parties of the 1970s, but also to the so-called *jihadi* parties which developed out of the Sunnite and Shiite anti-Soviet *mujaheddin* groups of the 1980s and to the “democratic” mini-parties which were formed from 2002 onwards with a strong focus on specific personalities, which have yet to prove that they are democratic in character and have countrywide support from the population.

Karzai’s reluctance to found a party of his own is probably attributable to his tendency to keep several options open. Was it his intention to conceal the fact that neither he himself nor any of his closest advisors was able or willing to form a political party? Is he therefore waiting for an offer from outside? Such an offer could come in two possible ways. Either one of the new “democratic” leaders could offer his party to Karzai as his parliamentary basis (some of them, indeed, are reputed to have received funding from Karzai), or several independent delegates in the *Wolesi Jirga* could band together and offer their alliance to Karzai as the core of a “presidential” party.

However, a more plausible explanation is probably that Karzai’s reservations against a party-political system are fundamental and not merely tactical in nature. International advisors and Afghan insiders have frequently pointed out the president’s style of governance and his systematic efforts to style himself as a national leader in the sense of a *supreme khan* (a traditional tribal leader). These efforts suggest that Karzai aims to develop a traditional Afghan ruling system rather than a party democracy based on western models.

Karzai's style of leadership too, which has been described as patriarchal, would seem to bear out this hypothesis. There is an evident danger, therefore, of a system of patronage based on personal client relationships undermining the first steps towards developing state institutions and an administration in which posts are assigned based on professional qualifications. Inevitable political conflicts could prompt Karzai to take the vast powers invested in him by the constitutional presidential system and use them according to traditional patterns. Thus the emergent political system would develop in an *autocratic* direction.

Fragmentation and structural deficits of the parliament

While the identities of the most influential leaders who will attempt to entrench their client interest groups in the parliament are known, it is currently impossible to predict the alliances that will be able to win a majority.

Although many delegates are probably tacit supporters of specific groups, it is impossible at present to determine which wing they will align themselves with in the future. Women in particular were silent about their political affiliation during the election campaign in order to increase their chances. It seems safe to assume that some of them will support Karzai. However, in both the former communist and the new "democratic" parties there may be qualified women who cannot be assigned to a simple "pro-Karzai vs. anti-Karzai" paradigm. Even the conservative and Islamist groups include women, as some *jihadi* leaders used female family members, who were not burdened with a military background, as fronts in the election campaign. These "proxies" may vote for or against Karzai by turns, depending on the interests of their clan leaders.

Additionally, strong individual personalities may be expected to change sides frequently in their quest for power. This

tendency became evident in the power struggles surrounding the election of the president of the *Wolesi Jirga*. One of the four contenders for the office was Yunus Qanoni, who previously established himself as the leader of the "opposition" (a loose alliance of about eleven parties). This alliance also included the second contender, Mohammed Mohaeqeq, who had made a name for himself as the representative of the ethnic minority of the Hazaras. The third candidate was Abd-rab al-Rasoul Sayyaf, an Islamist *jihadi* leader who had entered into several power compromises with Karzai. The fourth candidate was the doyen of the *jihadi* leaders, Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani. Two alliances were formed in secret. Qanoni stood for election with the support of Rabbani, who did not stand himself. In the second round of the elections, Qanoni beat his opponent Sayyaf. Mohaeqeq had previously withdrawn in favour of Sayyaf and changed sides. An upset came only a few days later, when Qanoni announced that he was stepping down as "leader of the Opposition" in favour of Rabbani. To appreciate the ramifications of this act, one needs to be aware that Rabbani is the father-in-law of Vice-President Ahmad Zia Massoud and one of the central pillars of the Karzai government. Considering that Qanoni's party members, in addition, were trained with US aid money in the run-up to the parliamentary elections and then described themselves as a "loyal opposition" during the campaign, there is some justification for wondering who belonged to the government camp and who was in the "opposition".

These wranglings are reminiscent of procedures which were evident even during the constitutional *Loya Jirga* in December 2003 and which would now seem to characterise the functioning of the new parliament. The official plenary sessions avoid coming to decisions so that the "give and take" can be negotiated during the evening in the back rooms. This is incompatible with a functional democracy's demand for

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transparency and also fosters corruption. Patrons who have a strong and reliable following will use it to boost their negotiating strength when the government or opposition leaders seek parliamentary majorities. It is clear that such short-lived, ad hoc majorities are a breeding ground for corruption. As the political rise of Mohaqeq shows, minority leaders are capable of ensuring a loyal following by appealing to ethnic solidarity. Thus this system of negotiation reinforces ethnic distinctions.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that voting behaviour in the parliament will be governed exclusively by individual ambition and ethnic loyalties. Rather, social and cultural basic attitudes too will play an important role. After the confrontational situation of the *jihad* period, which was characterised by the ideological categories of the Cold War, political behaviour is now governed by a new, fundamental controversy. There are two sides to this controversy: Conservative leaders who wish to preserve “traditional” values on the one hand, and “reformers” working towards western-influenced liberalisation on the other. However, these two sides are not homogeneous camps; rather, groups with different attitudes can be identified on both sides. While this will result in variable voting results, it will also foster corruption. Two main wings can be identified on the conservative side, which is supported by a large majority of the population: The conservative Islamist wing and the moderate traditionalist wing. Islamist leaders successfully appeal to sacrosanct religious values in their campaign for power and support. As in the constitutional *Loya Jirga*, therefore, Karzai must regularly make covert concessions to conservative Islamist leaders like Sayyaf in order to draw them into the government’s camp. Without their support, Karzai cannot secure the necessary majority votes for his policies.

In contrast, some representatives of the moderate traditionalist wing may very well be open to cautious attempts at liberalisation. They see themselves as the champions

of traditional cultural values which are rooted in the innumerable variants of customary law that have evolved in different regions. These customary laws consist of the uncoded and in many cases pre-Islamic rules of tribes and communal groups in the multi-ethnic state of Afghanistan. The distinction made by the west between religious and cultural values is not recognised by the Afghans themselves, who regard all tribal traditions as being Islamic.

The reform side too is a heterogeneous force. It includes “liberal” representatives of the new democratic mini-parties and “leftwing” politicians who have shed their former Communist orientation and are now denouncing social problems and widespread poverty. Most of the women members are likely to join this camp. However, one should not overlook those women who stand for religious and traditionalist values out of personal conviction.

Finally, the unorganised group of “independents” represents an unknown quantity. The question of their policies and tactical behaviour remains open, but it seems likely that they will lean towards the reform side. Significantly, the independents were not compelled to join any of the new “parliamentary groups” after the formation of the parliament. This concession suggests that Karzai is hoping for their support.