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NEWS

MPs Protest Divides Wolesi Jirga

A small number of Wolesi Jirga lawmakers protested on 9 August against possible changes to results of the 2010 Parliamentary elections. The protest initially took place within the National Assembly (NA) compound and attracted supporters who joined with the MPs to voice their support for no changes to the results. The peaceful protest moved out of the NA compound to the streets of Kabul on 16 August, with MPs joined by their supporters.

In the plenary of 13 August, Mr. Iqbal Kohestani (Kapisa) criticized the inclusion of non-MPs in the protest, explaining “We don’t want outside interference in the protest. The outsiders come and want to take advantage for their own purposes.” Mr. Kohestani appeared to be referring to former Afghan Head of Intelligence, Amrullah Saleh and representatives of the Change and Hope coalition led by Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, who attended the protest on 10 August and announced their support. Mr. Anwar Oriakhail (Kabul) agreed with Mr. Kohestani, claiming that outsiders who joined the protests have other agendas, “...the election results are just an excuse for them.”

Not all MPs were unhappy about the outsider help they received. Mr. Muhammad Naem Lalai Hameedzai, an MP from Kandahar and one of the most vocal supporters of the protest, said: “We have a tent outside and everyone is welcome to join us in support of our cause.”

Mr. Alhaj Allahgul Mujahid, an MP from Kabul, claimed to have the support of all Mujahids (holy warriors who fought against the Soviet Union and happen to share the surname Mujahid), said: “On behalf of all Mujahids of Kabul, I hereby declare my support for this protest. We will do everything it takes to support the 62 MPs whose names are on the proposed list to be unseated.”

As the protest entered its seventh day on 16 August, a group of about 50 lawmakers calling themselves the “Reformists,” split from the Protectors of Law Coalition, which has been at the forefront of protesting any changes to the parliamentary composition. The “Reformists” claimed to seek to stop the escalation of the crisis between the three branches of government by mediating between them.

Mr. Shir Wali Wardak (Kabul) a founder member of the Reformists group called on his colleagues during the plenary of 17 August, to stop the protest. “I suggest we stop the protest under the tent outside. It is harming our own unity inside the house and it’s not achieving anything. Let’s put an end to it right now.”

Mr. Alhaj Khudadad Irfani (Ghazni) however did not agree with Mr. Wardak and said that the protesting MPs did not mean to divide the house. “Our protest is not to divide the Wolesi Jirga but rather to keep it united. We are merely trying to uphold the law.”

Mr. Haji Khalil Ahmad Shahidzada (Herat) rejected Mr. Wardak’s call to discontinue the protest. “We continue with our protest and no one can take that right from us.”

Senators Oppose MPs Tent Protest

While the Protectors of Law Coalition, a group of Wolesi Jirga MPs protesting the Special Elections Court efforts to unseat MPs, continued with their protest under a tent inside the National Assembly (NA) compound, senators in the Meshrano Jirga (MJ) expressed concerns about Parliament’s security and broader national implications of the protest action.

Senator Sher Mohammad Akhondzada voiced his opposition during the MJ plenary of 14 August, saying, “The Wolesi Jirga should remove the tent from the NA area and Meshrano Jirga Speaker should discuss the issue with security officials to remove it. If they don’t [remove the tent], I will erect another tent in the NA parking area” Mr. Abdul Khaleqdad Balaghi (Kabul) agreed. “WJ should remove the tent from the area around Parliament and this turmoil must end.” said Mr. Balaghi.

Some senators specifically questioned whether or not the WJ MPs had the authority to erect a tent. “The WJ’s tent is illegal, they should remove it” claimed Senator Taiba Zahidi (Herat).

Other senators considered the presence of the tent, coupled with an increase in the numbers of “bodyguards” inside the NA premises, to resemble a military zone. “The National Assembly has been turned into a military training center instead of legislative body,” Senator Gul Ahmad Azami said.

Senator Akhondzada even threatened that, if the situation continued, he would match every armed man with one of his own. “We must warn Mr. Zahir Qadeer [the leader of Protectors of Law Coalition] to remove the tent otherwise I will erect my own tent and bring armed people,” said Akhondzada.

Senator Hidayatullah Rehaye (Bamyan) said: “The Protectors of Law Coalition is engaged in a propaganda exercise against the government which is not in the interest of the country.”

Mrs. Najiba Hussaini (Dikundi) suggested that there was a trust deficit between both sides and that it needed addressing. “WJ cannot trust either the President or the courts. This crisis will have serious effects on the country.” Senator Hassan Hotak (Zabul) added, “The current

crisis [between the WJ and the government] concerns the nation and the international community. Members of WJ make irresponsible comments.”

MJ Speaker Muslemyar agreed with the senators that the tent was indeed a cause of concern and promised that he would discuss the issue with security officials. He further announced that the MJ would be pleased to mediate if asked to do so. “MJ is ready to mediate if WJ or the government requests,” concluded Speaker Muslemyar.

NA Delegation Returns from Iran with “Accomplishment”

A thirty member delegation of lawmakers from both houses of the Afghan National Assembly visited the Islamic Republic of Iran on 22 July in order to establish closer ties between the legislatures of both countries. The “Union of Thoughts” trip was an initiative by the Iranian Majles (Parliament) and lasted for four days.

Mr. Haji Mohammad Muhageq (Kabul), Chairman of the Justice and Judiciary Affairs Committee, reported to the Wolesi Jirga (WJ) plenary session of 13 August, saying “Our Iranian brothers were hospitable, but the trend of the mood in our negotiations could best be described as a rollercoaster.”

Iran and Afghanistan share a long border and the issue of Afghan refugees has always been a contentious matter between the two countries. There is no official figure available about the numbers of Afghan refugees in Iran, and both countries claim different numbers. Mr. Muhageq, who led the Afghan legislative delegation, informed the house that both sides reached a compromise about illegal refugees in Iran following lengthy negotiations. He explained that forced repatriation of illegal refugees caused heated exchanges between both sides, causing the meeting to be cut short and the Iranian Minister of Interior stormed out. “We resumed our talks and reached a middle ground. The Iranians would issue employment visas for all families, however, single men would be sent back to Afghanistan to apply for visas.” said Mr. Muhageq.

Mr. Muhageq also informed the house that parliamentary friendship groups between the two countries would be established soon. He added that the mayor of Tehran would build a national park in the capital city Kabul in the near future.

Treaties Ratified by Meshrano Jirga

Transit Agreement between Afghanistan and Pakistan:

Under this agreement, Afghan trucks are allowed to carry Afghan transit export cargo to Pakistani ports and also to the Indian border. The agreement has the potential to boost Afghanistan's development and regional trade. While it excludes Indian exports across Pakistan for the time being, over time it may also open up trade across the border with India, thus providing a substantial stepping stone in the integration of South and Central Asian economies

The agreement was ratified by the Wolesi Jirga on 1 June and sent to the Meshrano Jirga which voted to ratify the agreement on 14 August by a majority vote.

Establishment of Diplomatic Relations with Kingdom of Bhutan, Republic of Fiji and Montenegro

Also on 14 August, the Meshrano Jirga ratified proposals to establish diplomatic relations with the Kingdom of Bhutan, and the Republics of Fiji and Montenegro following earlier approval by the Wolesi Jirga on 1 June 2011. Afghanistan will not open diplomatic offices in these countries however diplomatic and consulate affairs relating to these countries will be managed by Afghan embassies in neighboring countries.

Acronyms

MJ	Meshrano Jirga
NA	National Assembly
WJ	Wolesi Jirga