



Afghan Presidential Election: Potential Candidates and Powerbrokers



Presidential Election Scheduled for 20 August

Article 61 of Afghanistan's Constitution¹ states that the presidential election should be held "thirty to sixty days prior to the expiration of the current president's term," which ends on 22 May. However, Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission on 4 March announced that it would push back the date of the election to 20 August in order to address funding, security, and weather challenges to organizing a nationwide free and fair election (iec.org.af). Afghan media have highlighted potential candidates and powerbrokers who may be influential in the election.

Potential Candidates for 2009



Abdullah Abdullah, Afghanistan's minister of foreign affairs from 2001 to 2006, is running as the candidate for the National Front. In a 2 February interview with *Jawedan.com*, he supported the presence of international forces to improve the security situation in the country. Regarding the Taliban, he said that the door for negotiation should be "kept open to anyone willing to lay down their arms and join the peace process, except for Mullah Omar and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar," whom he claimed were "pushing Afghanistan to war and destruction." Once a special adviser and chief assistant to mujahidin commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, he also served as chief of staff and spokesman for the Ministry of Defense in the mujahidin government of 1992 (zmong-afghanistan.com).



Anwar-ul-Haq Ahadi in December 2008 resigned as Afghanistan's minister of finance to run for president, according to the *Afghan Online Press* website. Ahadi is the leader of the Afghan National Party, one of Afghanistan's oldest and largest nationalist Pashtun parties, whose main goals are to improve education and the economy and to promote Afghan national unity, according to its website. In a 3 February interview with independent Afghan Tolo TV, Ahadi pledged to set up a tolerant Islamic administration and engage with insurgent groups to reach a political settlement. Ahadi served as governor of Afghanistan's central bank from 2002 to 2004, where he oversaw the redenomination of the Afghani (to 50 per dollar). A US-educated technocrat, in the 1980's he taught political science and was a bank director in the United States. Ahadi is married to Fatima Gailani, the current head of the Afghan Red Crescent Society and daughter of spiritual and political leader Pir Gailani (quqnoos.com).



Shahla Atta, Afghanistan's first female presidential candidate, is a member of parliament. In a 7 March press conference published in *Pajwak Afghan News*, Atta said that she is running for president "on the appeals of a number of Afghans inside and outside of Afghanistan" and to "strengthen the country's democratic values." Promising to follow the policies of former President Mohammad Daud Khan if elected, she pledged to "speed up the process of reconstruction, make education compulsory, provide free treatment to drug addicts, make provisions for prompt justice, and implement judicious use of foreign aid, strengthening the economy and other sectors of the country."



Ramazan Bashardost is a member of parliament and served as Afghanistan's former planning minister. On his website, *Bashardost.org*, he lists 52 issues that he would address as president, including security, corruption, education, agriculture, and industry, and he invites Afghans to submit their views and advice. In a January interview with *Afghan-German Online*, Bashardost said that "the Taliban are not fighting with America, but with the corrupt Afghan Government." He added that "the US can bring security to Afghanistan quickly," but said that the United States "is interested in making Afghanistan a permanent base for controlling Central Asia and Iran." Bashardost is a political scientist who studied and taught at French universities from 1981 to 2003.



Bashir Bizhan is a politician and the former chief editor of the *National Union of Afghan Journalist Magazine*. He is deputy director of the Afghan National Congress Party (ANCP), a secular political party that opposes Islamist or Taliban regimes and favors federalism, according to its leader, Latif Pedram (humaniteinenglish.com). The ANCP party first gained attention when Pedram finished in fifth place in the 2004 presidential election. A critic of the Karzai government, Bizhan described the presence of international troops in Afghanistan as "illegal," according to a 10 March interview with *Afghan-e-Melli* newspaper.



Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai² served in the Karzai government as finance minister and then as chancellor of Kabul University. According to a 21 December 2008 *Quqnoos* article, Ajma-e Mellii, a national consensus group, has urged Ghani to run for president. Ghani has labeled the Karzai government "among the five most corrupt governments in the world, where corrupt officials are not punished, but promoted" (benawa.com). He has supported negotiations with the Taliban and has defended the presence of international forces in Afghanistan (larawbar.net).



Ali Ahmad Jalali² was Afghanistan's interior minister from 2003 to 2005. In a 27 March interview with Tolo TV, Jalali said that he had "not ruled out running for the presidency in 2009." In a 2 March article in *e-Ariana.com*, he criticized corruption and nepotism, advocated the rule of law, and spoke of the need for infrastructure development, agricultural reform, and capacity building. He was an officer in the Afghan National Army until the early 1980's.



Hamid Karzai is the current president of Afghanistan. He was selected at the Bonn Conference in December 2001 to lead the Afghan Interim Administration after the fall of the Taliban and was elected president in October 2004. Allied with the United States and the international community, Karzai's website states that his government has made progress in many sectors, but that "good news does not make the news" (president.gov.af). During the Afghan resistance to Soviet rule, Karzai worked in political positions with the mujahidin and was appointed deputy foreign minister in the mujahidin government of 1992, which he relinquished two years later when civil war erupted between various mujahidin groups. Karzai belongs to the influential Popalzai tribe in southern Afghanistan; his father was a tribal elder who served in the parliament in the 1960's and was assassinated in 1999 by the Taliban (afghan-web.com/bios).



Zalmay Khalilzad² has been urged to run for president of Afghanistan. According to an article on *taand.com*, on 18 March "thousands of people gathered in Nangarhar Province asking Khalilzad to run for president in the upcoming election in Afghanistan," and a 5 April *Xinhuanet* article reported that similar rallies occurred in Helmand and Bamyan Provinces. Following an 8 April interview with Ariana TV in which Khalilzad reaffirmed his commitment to Afghanistan, some commentators in the domestic media have posited that he will run for president of Afghanistan this year.



Ahmad Zia Massoud serves as first vice president to Hamid Karzai and previously served as Karzai's ambassador to the Russian Federation. Massoud is a member of the Afghan National Front, the main government opposition group run by Burhanuddin Rabbani, who is his father-in-law, according to a 20 July 2008 article in *Quqnoos*. He is the brother of slain mujahidin commander Ahmad Shah Massoud.



Mohammad Yunus Qanooni is the speaker of the lower house of parliament and a prominent Karzai political rival and critic. Qanooni was a leading presidential candidate in the 2004 election, particularly among the Tajik population, finishing second to Karzai, and Afghan media have speculated that he will run again this year. During the resistance to Soviet rule, Qanooni was one of Ahmad-Shah Massoud's trusted advisers. He served as minister of interior during the mujahidin government of 1992. He regained that post after the Taliban's fall in 2001 but had to relinquish it due to criticism of a Tajik monopoly of key government posts, accepting the position of minister of education instead, according to a *Eurasianet* article. Qanooni is a member of the National Front and the founder and leader of the New Afghanistan Party (afghan-web.com/bios).



Gul Agha Sherzai is governor of Nangarhar Province and previously served as a special adviser to Karzai. A prominent member of Kandahar's Barokzai tribe, Sherzai also served as governor of his province from 1992 to 1994 before he was ousted by the Taliban (afghan-web.com/bios). In a 14 January interview in *Benawa*, Sherzai supported inviting the Taliban to "end the fighting and take part in the peace process" and argued that "Afghanistan needs long-term projects in the areas of security, job creation, and reconstruction." Sherzai also stated that "coalition forces in Afghanistan should coordinate their operations with the Afghan Government, stop searching homes, and consider Afghan culture" (benawa.com).



Shahnawaz Tanai was a general and defense minister under President Najibullah from 1988 to 1990. A Pashtun from Khost Province, he currently heads the Afghanistan Peace Movement party, which he says "above all wants the rule of law," according to a September 2005 interview with the *New York Times*. Tanai announced his candidacy on 15 March in an interview with *Pajhwok Afghan News* when he stated: "I have peoples' support with me and I am sure they will vote for me; I served the country before and the nation is familiar with my name."

Powerbrokers

A number of prominent Afghan figures appear to be powerbrokers in Afghanistan's political scene. Many of these men acquired their influence as Jihad leaders with authority and arms, which they parlayed into backing from religious, ethnic, regional, or party coalitions that continue to support them. They could prove influential in this year's elections by supporting and mobilizing their political, religious, tribal, regional, and ethnolinguistic constituencies to support preferred candidates.



Abdul Hadi Arghandawi is the current chairman of the Islamic Party of Afghanistan, formed in 2008 by members who broke away from Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Islamic Party of Afghanistan. When elected chairman, Arghandawi announced that under his leadership, the party would work to "bring security to Afghanistan, which requires negotiation with all armed opposition groups in the country," and he called for the removal of the names of Taliban resistance groups from terrorist lists as a precondition to negotiation (afghanpaper.com).



Abdul Rashid Dostum is the current chief of staff to the commander in chief of the Afghan National Army, an honorary position. He previously served as President Karzai's security and defense adviser. A prominent leader of Uzbeks in Afghanistan, Dostum heads the National Islamic Movement party, a mainly Uzbek party. Dostum was a leading presidential candidate in the 2004 election, particularly among the Uzbek population, finishing in fourth place (boston.com). In the 1980's, Dostum was a regional military commander under President Najibullah, but he later joined the mujahidin who were trying to control Mazar-e Sharif and northern Afghanistan. After 9/11, he helped coalition forces to defeat the Taliban at the Mazar front. Dostum is a member of the National Front (http://afghan-web.com/bios).



Pir Sayeed Ahmed Gailani is a religious and political leader. A relative moderate, he has followers among the educated professional classes as well as the Pashtun tribes of southern Afghanistan. Gailani supported Hamid Karzai in the 2004 presidential election and participated in the formation of the Karzai government. Gailani has declared his support for the US presence in Afghanistan and has stated that "innocent" members of the Taliban should be allowed to participate in Afghan politics (afghan-web.com). During the resistance to Soviet rule, Gailani founded and led the National Islamic Front, one of the original parties of the Pakistan-based resistance groups. His daughter, Fatma Gailani, heads the Afghan Red Crescent Society and is married to Anwar al-Haq Ahadi, a presidential candidate (quqnoos.com).



Ismail Khan is the current water and energy minister. An influential figure in western Afghanistan, he was previously governor of Herat Province. Ismail Khan rose to prominence during the anti-communist mutiny in 1979, when as an army captain he refused to fire on a mob in the Herat bazaar and instead turned his guns on the city's Soviet advisers. He later joined the mujahidin who were trying to control Herat and western Afghanistan. After 9/11, he helped coalition forces to defeat the Taliban at the Herat front. He is a member of the National Front (afghan-web.com).



Karim Khalili is currently second vice president to Hamid Karzai. A Hazara leader and head of the Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan, he was selected to lead the party after the Taliban killed the original party leader in 1995 (nps.edu). Khalili wields particular influence among the Hazara population in central Afghanistan, according to *afghan-web.com*.



Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq, currently a member of parliament, is a prominent Hazara leader and a strong advocate of Hazara shia interests in Afghanistan. He was a leading presidential candidate in the 2004 election -- particularly among the Hazara population, including the Hazara refugees in Iran -- finishing in third place. Mohaqiq founded the People's Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan, an offshoot of the Islamic Unity Party. He served as vice president and minister of planning in the interim government of Afghanistan, but his term ended following differences with President Karzai and former Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani (afghan-web.com/bios).



Sebghatollah Mojaddedi, a religious and political leader, is currently speaker of the legislature's Upper House, and he previously chaired the 2003 Constitutional Loya Jirga. Mojaddedi is chairman of the National Commission for Peace in Afghanistan, which works to bring former armed opposition groups into the peace process, according to *aopnews.com*. During the resistance to Soviet rule, Mojaddedi headed the National Liberation Front of Afghanistan in Peshawar, and he served briefly as president in the mujahidin government of 1992. He has blamed Pakistan for Afghanistan's problems and says that he is against foreign interference, according to a November 2005 interview published in the *Doha Times*, and a September 2006 article in *zmong-afghanistan.com*.



Burhanuddin Rabbani has served as a member of parliament since 2005. He leads the National Front, the main political coalition opposing the Karzai government. An Islamic scholar educated at Cairo's Al-Azhar University, Rabbani is also the leader of Islamic Society, the oldest Islamic political party in Afghanistan, which was influential among ethnic Tajiks in the former mujahidin parties. Rabbani was president of Afghanistan after the collapse of President Najibullah's regime in 1992. Ahmad Zia Massoud, the current Afghan vice president, is Rabbani's son-in-law (quqnoos.com).



Abdul Rab Rassoul Sayyaf is a Pashtun leader who has been described as a fundamentalist by academics and Afghan media (*Afghanistan Affairs*, 15 April 2006; *aopnews.com*). An Islamic scholar educated at Cairo's Al-Azhar University, Sayyaf is the head of Afghanistan's Islamic Mission Organization, known in the 1980's as the Islamic Union for the Liberation of Afghanistan. Prominent in the war against Soviet occupation, Sayyaf's organization had substantial links to Islamists outside Afghanistan and was generously financed by Saudi Arabia (laghman.net). The party has a following among Afghanistan's most conservative populace and favors pushing the country toward greater conservatism on religious issues, according to *aopnews.com*.

¹ The Embassy of Afghanistan, Washington D.C., *embassyofafghanistan.org*.

² Article 62 of Afghanistan's Constitution requires a presidential candidate to be a citizen of Afghanistan, and not of any other country; a 19 February *Kabul Press* article, citing this requirement, questioned the eligibility of Ghani, Jalali, and Khalilzad to run for president.