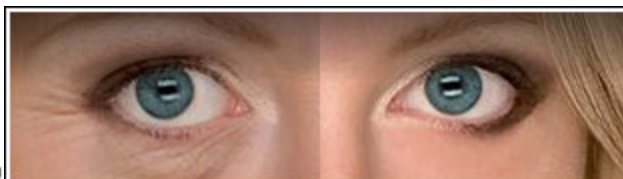


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DEMOCRACY IN THE BALANCE

Living symbols of reform in Afghanistan

Female lawmakers work for, and embody, change.

By Alissa J. Rubin
Times Staff Writer

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AMONG the crowd of 800 turbaned elders who gathered in a vast tent, one person stood out: a slender woman in a white head scarf.

She took the podium only briefly, but when she did, most conversation came to a standstill. And though many of the bearded, tradition-bound elders are uncomfortable talking to a woman in public, several dozen clustered around her afterward to ask questions.

Her name is Zahera Sharif, and she is the only woman among the four members of Afghanistan's parliament from Khowst province. In a conservative area where it is possible to drive through towns without seeing a single woman on the street, she is a rarity.

As a member of parliament, she represents an institution that Western observers and experts in Afghanistan say is the country's best shot at building a stable democracy after years of war and religious extremism.

Among the 248 members of parliament's lower house, there are elders such as those Sharif met here. But there are also former exiles in Western-style business suits. All of the country's ethnic groups have a place: Uzbeks sit next to Tajiks; Pashtuns with Hazaras. There are onetime Taliban as well as their former Northern Alliance enemies. A quarter of the parliament members are women; not one wears a burka.

Some of those who gather in the low-slung building on the western edge of Kabul use old militia ties to get things done. Others take the floor to criticize the warlords. Or, like Sharif, they forgo the debate and focus instead on meeting the needs of their constituents.

"For the first time after 30 years of war, we've brought some major figures, who in the past would only talk to each other with a gun, under one roof," said Younis Qanooni, the speaker of parliament.

Western diplomats find some hope in that inclusiveness, as well as in the institution's willingness to challenge President Hamid Karzai.

The president has considerable authority, but parliament has insisted on its right to review his decisions. Deputies rejected five of Karzai's 25 nominations for Cabinet posts in the spring and seven of his picks for the Supreme Court, including one accused of selling legal decisions.

"More often than not, the reform impulse has come from the parliament," a senior Western diplomat said.

Not that it has been easy. The majority of Afghanistan's lawmakers still have their roots in the country's warring past. A number served as militia commanders and made their names and their money behind the barrel of a gun.

Even among the 68 women in parliament, U.S. and United Nations officials estimate that half have militia ties, and can be counted on to keep quiet and vote as they are told.

Some lawmakers still spit during sessions as though they were on a mountain road. Others doze off. A popular television news program was banned briefly from broadcasting parliamentary sessions because it showed lawmakers, heads thrown back, snoring. Many take the floor seemingly without any idea of what they want to say.

Despite their lack of experience in representative democracy, deputies have developed a range of styles to pursue their different political agendas on the floor of parliament and in visits to their districts.

Malalai Joya, a 27-year-old woman, publicly challenges the enduring power of warlords in a Western-style media campaign. For that, she has been pelted with water bottles in the parliament chamber, and twice her microphone has been shut off.

Haji Almas, 45, is a member of the old commanders network. He is angry that Karzai's government and its Western allies refuse to allow former warlords to run the country's military. But he also has embraced education and points with pride to schools that have been built.

Sharif, meanwhile, is a realist. Afghanistan will not change overnight, she believes. So she keeps quiet when commanders arrive at parliament sessions with their bodyguards in tow.

"They know they have done nothing for Afghanistan; they don't have answers for Afghanistan," said Sharif, 46. "But they are still there; they have supporters."

"People in parliament need to focus on issues one by one: electricity, jobs, education," she told the Khowst elders who had gathered in the tent to discuss pressing nationwide problems. "Everybody should think of the benefit of the society."

Getting an education

Sharif is no stranger to the conservative religious attitudes of southern Afghanistan. Her father was an imam, and he objected to her going to school past age 11. Miserable, she stayed in the women's quarters of the family home and stopped eating.

Her eldest brother finally won permission from their father to let her return to school, and later to take all his siblings to Kabul to finish high school, because schools there were better. Sharif went on to Kabul University, where she earned a master's degree in education. She became a member of the elite Academy of Sciences. At the time, Afghanistan was a Soviet satellite and many women

were attending university and becoming professionals.

At the university, she met the man who became her husband, Mohammed Sharif Zadran, a Khowst native who also holds an advanced degree in education. In his own way, he is no less remarkable.

From the beginning of their courtship, he helped her to advance. When she was required to submit two copies of her 300-page master's thesis, he copied the second one by hand because Afghanistan had no copy machines.

But then the Taliban took over. She and her husband were forced to quit their jobs. Zadran had to do manual labor to help the family get by. After two years, they fled to Pakistan, where Sharif started a magazine for women, organized classes for Afghan refugee girls and trained female teachers who she hoped would go back to Afghanistan after the Taliban fell.

Within days of their return to Khowst when the rule of the mullahs was over, Sharif took off her burka and walked down the main street.

"Everybody was watching her as if they thought something terrible would happen — they were leaning out of doors, staring out of windows," recalled Naquibullah, the deputy director of Khowst's main radio station.

Despite ridicule from other men, Zadran stood by his wife when she decided to plunge into politics, even though it meant doing something unheard of for a woman here: going door-to-door in remote villages and introducing herself to strangers.

"People would say to me, 'How can you let your wife do that?' " recalled Zadran. He shrugged. "I said, 'What do you want me to do? Lock her in the house?' "

The answer for many Afghan men would have been 'yes.'

Sharif and Zadran have four children; both are devoted to caring for their youngest daughter, Zala, 3, who has Down syndrome.

And Sharif has tried to address the problems of young people in her legislative work.

She successfully fought legislation that would have allowed children as young as 13 to be punished as adults if they were found guilty of crimes.

She has been less successful fighting the corruption that permeates public and private life, or getting the central government to respond to her district's needs.

The agriculture minister gave Sharif barely 15 minutes of his time and flatly refused her request for subsidized fertilizer for farmers in her district. He didn't even respond to her complaints that most of the 40 goats that were designated for needy Khowst women ended up going to families who had connections to Agriculture Ministry officials.

More than once Sharif has joined with other reform-minded legislators to urge Karzai to replace corrupt police chiefs and governors connected with the opium trade.

"I told Karzai, 'You are just playing chess, taking the same person and moving him from one job to another,' " she said. "Then Karzai said, 'Give me men, give me names.' And we gave him names

and he said, 'No, he's a Communist, no, he's this, he's that.' And he took almost none of them."

Afghan and international observers say Karzai's weak government relies on such local strongmen.

When she does overcome barriers to helping her constituents, Sharif finds it difficult to get credit.

She persuaded a rich Kabul resident to donate uniforms, sneakers, nets and balls to the Khowst volleyball and soccer teams, and she brought them when she returned from Kabul for the summer. But when she invited team members to her home to hand out the equipment, her husband and the coaches did most of the talking, and her resourcefulness went largely unappreciated by her constituents.

Where Sharif really shines is in her interaction with women, her original inspiration for entering politics. Women cast 45% of the votes in Khowst, and though some voted for men, analysts in Kabul believe that the vast majority voted for Sharif.

When she entered the high-walled compound that surrounds the Khowst women's center and the school for girls, she had hardly stepped out of her car before the women surged around her. There were young girls in their school uniforms clutching notebooks and pencils, older women who worked as cleaners, some still carrying their brooms. Teachers, middle-aged women with worn faces, reached over their students to touch her shoulder or hand.

As she handed out books and information about Women's Ministry programs from two huge sacks of supplies she had brought from Kabul, it was possible to believe Sharif could achieve her dream of "taking all the women with me" on her way forward.

There is a long way to go. A bare room serves as the reception area in the women's center. In stark contrast to the rooms warlords use when they hold court, this one had no rug or cushions, just flimsy plastic chairs, three scarred desks and a few torn fliers pinned to the walls.

There were no tea and biscuits, no plates of fruit. But the women's voices rose and fell as if they were at a feast. They recounted their latest trials and small victories: the difficulty of getting a job as a midwife, recent cases of child brides abused by men, the challenge of teaching science to students when there is not a single Bunsen burner in all of Khowst.

Sharif listened closely, nodding, occasionally asking a question or jotting something in a small notebook.

She believes in personal persuasion to bring about change. She knows that without female teachers, many families will not send their daughters to school. So she goes to the homes of women who have a university education and asks why they are not teaching. If they say their families will not allow it, she meets with their husbands, uncles, fathers and brothers, until she gets their agreement.

"I do not accept 'no,' " she said. "Usually, the men have not thought so hard about it, they have not thought that their wife will be earning money, that the family will be richer if the wife works. When they understand this and they understand that she will be with women, most of them accept it."

An influential man

Sharif's journey to her legislative district could not be more different than such a trip by Almas, the former commander of the Northern Alliance's 5th Corps.

Almas conveys his status with every gesture. He is so well known in Parwan province that when he stops his car to point out the location of a strategic battle, half a dozen vehicles pull off the road so their drivers can greet him.

Thickset, he wears a spotless white *shalwar kameez* and, even in the hot Afghan summer, the brown wool hat favored by Northern Alliance leaders. He moves with a determined stride.

His tone with subordinates is often peremptory; with supplicants, impatient. With those who consider themselves equals, he listens, then issues orders.

Westerners and some Afghan police officials describe him privately as a bully and a criminal who is active on the periphery of the lucrative narcotics trade, complicit in kidnappings and enriched by corrupt business deals. Some election officials attempted to prevent him from running, but failed, said a senior Western diplomat.

"Almas is one of the former commanders who has really cemented his power since he came into government," the official said.

Nasreen Gross, a sociology lecturer at Kabul University, said the international community must make an effort to win over men such as Almas. These former commanders influence many Afghans, and without their support, democracy could well fail, she said.

"They desire so much to be accepted by the West," Gross said. "Before, they had to do things illegally. No one helped them when they were fighting the Taliban. When you get involved in illegal activities, it's a cycle, it's self-perpetuating and insidious.

"We have to find an opening for those who want to gain respectability.... They can help us."

A trip home with Almas indicates that he is still divided between his warlord past and his emerging identity as a member of parliament, as though he has yet to decide whether the legitimacy of being in government is worth the payoff. So he veers wildly, dispensing tribal justice and bullying government officials, even while espousing education and adherence to the rule of law.

A man of limited education, Almas started fighting in his early teens. Now he is a fanatic about schooling.

In the early 1990s, when little education was available for girls, he built two schools in his district, one for boys and one for girls. His daughters are in high school, and he says he will allow them to attend university. He has two wives and is proud that the second is a university graduate.

When he arrived in his home village of Rabat to eat lunch at the funeral of a village elder, scores of men gathered around him, a mirror image of Sharif's experience with women.

A privileged few ate with him in a small room and pressed their demands. Chief among them was jobs. They wanted the government to start a long-promised water project. Almas listened as he gnawed on a mutton bone and scooped up saffron rice with his fingers in the traditional Afghan style.

A little later an elder cornered him as he walked to the mosque for Friday prayers and asked for help. There had been trouble the night before, a knife fight between two boys. Both were wounded.

At the mosque, Almas spoke after the imam finished. "Don't behave in ways that make people call us the thieves of Rabat," he admonished the villagers.

Then he lashed out at imams for failing to preach the importance of education. "The mullahs taught us to reach for our guns but not for our pens. That is why our country is so behind," he said as the imam shifted uncomfortably.

After prayers, Almas held a meeting in a vast open tent in his family's walled rose garden. As young men served tea and candy, the two wounded boys, their heads bandaged, appeared with their fathers and grandfathers to apologize to the community for fighting the night before.

Almas made the fathers sign a pledge that they would go to jail if their sons started another dispute.

The next morning, Almas and an entourage of armed bodyguards zoomed in SUVs to the Parwan governor's office to discuss the delayed water project.

The governor, who wears Western clothes and comes from another province, explained the delay. He was trying to determine who needed the water most. He often consulted a thin, elderly engineer, who nervously flipped through a folder.

As he spoke, the governor sipped a cup of coffee. He failed to offer any to Almas, an insult seemingly intended to show that he stood outside Almas' influence.

Almas looked pointedly at the cup. "We are parched, and you are drinking. Why don't you offer us some?"

The governor didn't answer. After a few more minutes Almas, who was less interested in who got the water than in starting the project and distributing the jobs, slapped his knees and got up. His entourage rose around him.

"So the project starts tomorrow," he said, less a question than a command. The governor said nothing, but gave a slight nod, indicating that Almas would get his way. Satisfied, Almas clapped him on the shoulder as though they were friends. He and his men moved on.

War of words

Joya focuses on one theme, the enduring power of men such as Almas. She uses radio and television exposure to denounce them, and despite Afghanistan's limited media outlets, hers is a familiar voice in the country's larger cities.

The youngest member of parliament is already a master of the well-turned phrase, the eloquent exaggeration, the slight simplification. Along with parliament colleague Ramazan Bashar Dost, who works out of a simple tent in the middle of a Kabul park, she is one of Afghanistan's most prominent populists.

Her message is that despite the changes in Afghanistan, corruption is still rampant and the warlords are still in power.

"How can we have democracy when we have these warlords? The majority of seats [in the parliament] have been taken by these black persons.... First they should be tried by a court, but

unfortunately the courts don't do that in Afghanistan," she said in one of the many interviews she gives to foreign and domestic reporters.

Even though she has become a well-known figure in many parts of Afghanistan, she remains a mystery in many ways. Most people who denounce the warlords will describe specific instances in which they, their families or perhaps their entire villages suffered. But Joya lived in Iran during much of the Taliban's rule.

Asked how she formed her viewpoint, she said only, "I suffered a lot and I saw people I know suffer. They cried, and I cried with them."

She has yet to make a concrete proposal for neutralizing the power of former commanders. So far, that doesn't seem to matter. Many people believe she is one of the few politicians who speak the truth.

They agree with her that brutal warlords now serving in high government positions are unlikely to look out for the best interests of the country.

"Malalai Joya says what many people know to be true," said Saad Mohseni, the director of Moby Capital Partners, which runs the popular Tolo TV channel.

Sharif's husband, Zadran, also says he admires Joya. "Not many people are willing to say the things she says, and to speak honestly about our situation in Afghanistan," he told his wife as they discussed corruption in their home province.

Joya's candor has provoked such serious threats that she canceled plans to visit her home province of Farah during parliament's six-week summer break because she could not get the United Nations to provide sufficient protection. In Kabul, she moves every few days among several houses where friends or relatives shelter her.

She stays in the public eye through high-profile speeches in parliament and regular interviews with journalists. One evening last summer, she invited 20 reporters to dinner at her home in Kabul.

"The current government is in the hands of warlords," she told the journalists. "Peace and security cannot be established. Bribery has reached its zenith. The current government is involved in bribery, smuggling and bombings."

There is little difference between the Taliban and its Northern Alliance enemies, she declared. "The Taliban and Northern Alliance are connected to each other like a chain. In fact, the Northern Alliance is a good brother of the Taliban."

Former militia commanders resent her deeply, some because she reminds the country of their misdeeds and others because they believe they deserve thanks for fighting the Taliban.

When Joya took to the parliament floor in May with another of her denunciations, some threw water bottles at her. Other legislators ran forward to shield her. Someone ordered her microphone turned off so her comments would not be audible on television.

Despite the obstacles, legislators all have their own reasons for staying in parliament. But for many, the frustration level is high and their commitment is tenuous. "Sometimes I wake up and I think I should just stay home and not go out and try to change things," said Sharif.

The bigger risk is that Afghanistan will fall back on the code of violence that has dominated its history.

Joya said that along with the water bottles came a threat from Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, a warlord notorious for his cruelty who has become a powerful member of parliament: "She is lucky it was water bottles and not knives."

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