

Afghanistan – 2002 – Emergency Loya Jirga

Hello, my name is Dan Grant and I am here to talk about my experience with the emergency presidential Loya Jirga in Afghanistan in 2002. I arrived in Kabul in April or May of 2002, roughly 6 months after the Taliban had been driven out after the 9/11 attacks from the capital city. And Hamid Karzai had been identified and installed as the new president of the Republic of Afghanistan. There had not been any formal mechanism to grant any sort of electoral or popular legitimacy on Karzai as he had just been put into office. There wasn't, it wasn't feasible to conduct an election at the time, there wasn't any infrastructure for it. Afghanistan was in a state of complete disarray. There wasn't enough transport to do anything. No, not enough time to have an education programme for voters, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

So it was decided to hold a Loya Jirga, which means Grand Council, whereby representatives from all over Afghanistan would be selected by their local communities and then would travel to the capital city of Kabul, meet and then formally confer power on Karzai as the new president, speaking as representatives for the entire population. I arrived and it was very much a quick get things done and do it in as fast a capacity as possible and it was what was the most fascinating part of it was how ad hoc a great deal it was, largely because due to the lack of capacity on the ground, we had to improvise how we were able to pull things off.

This started with how I was employed. I was brought over as an employee of the Asia Foundation, a very well established NGO. And badged as such and brought in with a visa under their name, but then immediately given an identification badge as part of the UN entity on the ground, UNAMA, the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, which gave me a great deal of latitude as to where I could work and when I wouldn't be placed on under any specific embassy restriction from the United States. And then the international team that I was with of about 10 people, we all had the same arrangement where we worked for the Asia Foundation, but essentially were operating as UN employees. We would report to the UN. The American Embassy and the Allied military forces, which at time were under British command. And report out to each of them.

What this meant was we had to set up a gathering space that could handle over 1000 representatives across Afghanistan. And infrastructure was in a terrible state. There are very few buildings that can house that many people, that had plumbing that would that would function, that had heat that had electricity and that all had to be done in a matter of weeks. Think we had perhaps about a month and a half to get everything ready? And so. We were given a reasonably good budget, we were headed up by a gentleman who had had previous experience, the Balkans, as I had, and then it was a question of just

trying to run multiple jobs at once to move in this many people to make sure that religious accommodations were there for everybody, that Afghan women representatives would have appropriate accommodation, be kept separate from the men, but were included that various ethnic groups and religious groups would have representation, and there would be no difficulty among them, and so on and so on.

So it was a constant daily game of what fire needs to be put out today. In checking off all of these boxes, all while staring down the barrel of a deadline of when it was supposed to be, the biggest concern that we had, aside from the logistics of transporting everybody and feeding them and and keeping them housed, at the the former Polytechnic University just outside off of Kabul, was security because there was still a good deal of concern that a an attack could occur on where everyone was which could decapitate the government and and deal a serious blow to allied efforts at the time. And I remember one of the ,ost delicate and challenging knots to untangle that we had to deal with was the issue of weapons inside the hall where it was going to occur.

There were a series of perimeters surrounding the Loya Jirga site, again at the old Technical College, where it had dormitories that were refurbished, and a big meeting hall which was under a massive repurposed German tent, which it was rumoured to have been a beer hal but we could never establish that properly. And allowing everybody in to be screened, to be wanded, for women to be checked only by women and that no weapons were allowed inside the facility, which at the time, was an unusual proposition. There were so many of the Afghans who were joining. The government had been part of rebel groups that were armed to the teeth and for their own safety. They would constantly be in parties with rifles. And we made it a blanket policy that no one can come in and so everybody would be safe because no one would be armed and then we would prompt interesting conversations with various Afghan representatives, some who would say, well, what am I to do if I'm insulted? How can I, you know, how can I redress this? And we'll say, well, you have the opportunity to either do it verbally on the inside of the tent or once you're out. To address this however you see fit, but no guns on the inside. And it ultimately did work out, though at different points it was interesting.

When the initial government that had been set up under Karzai for the first few months prior to the jirga was operating, various government ministries were controlled by different factions of the Alliance of Afghans that had driven the Taliban out. With international forces and there was some horse trading that was going on within the cabinet as to which individuals would still have control of ministry so might be in some might be out and at the time. And there was rumours that the Minister of the Interior, I believe it was Yunus Qanuni, was going to be ousted and replaced with some other person for whatever political reason, a different rebalancing of representation. Well,

rumour of this got around that Qanuni was going to be bounced out of government and about halfway through the jirga itself, which the event only lasted a few days, ultimately. I think the second night? Of it, a group of Qanuni-ists and some of his men came all the way up to the security checkpoints within a truck bristling with rifles and breach to the compound. And we got panicked security calls in the operation Centre that was running everything, saying what to do, what to do and I got onto a call with the British commander of International Forces, General Nicholson, I believe, was his, I could be wrong, I might be. And he was one cool customer and he said we don't want anything to happen. You instruct all of the people working security to stand down. Let these men do what they wish at the security point. But the last thing we want is an incident. And so that's what happened. It wound up being just a strutting of stuff of parading around that. The minister, who was about to lose his job, was just trying to show that he still had some potency within the government. But seeing as there was no resistance and there was no incident that was going to occur after there had been an initial scuffle, all of the guys who tried to come in had done, packed up and left and away and we were hugely concerned that a violent incident could cause the entire enterprise to come crashing down that. People would abandon the jirga that it would be considered legitimate and that factionalism would break out and it would break apart. And so the desire to not do anything the the decision to not do anything was a wise one. And this happened in the middle of night. And so as a result, the press never got wind of it, which was amazing to me on neither within the Afghan press or the international press I. Got a call or two from some journalists I knew who had said they'd heard groomers, and if I had heard anything. And I said not to my knowledge because we didn't want anything that would promote this event to come to light lest it threaten the jirga itself and 'cause everything to come crashing down. And it word never got out, to my knowledge. Perhaps it had been reported after the fact.

Ultimately, it was a success. Everyone was gathered together. There was a convocation by an imam for everybody blessing the event. All of the various representatives were able to get along with one another, despite some internal recrimination of different groups. Some people complained about, how could warlords be involved in this? They're part of the problem that put us into this mess in the first place. But everybody stood up at the end and formally conferred power on Karzai, and then he was president, with legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghans. And then it was all broken down and everybody departed. One of the things that I did work on specifically was on organizing the airlift of all of the participants from the outer regions of Afghanistan into Kabul and then back out. And that. A massive task of, I think, half a dozen aircraft and a similar amount of helicopters flying round the clock, sorties with only occasional pauses for refuelling and repairs. Crew changes to just shovel 50 delegates and their families, or 100 delegates, 150, 50, hour after hour, day after day, in and out and in and out, in and

out, to get everybody into one spot and then cart. Out to the complex itself. So much so that I stood on the tarmac Kabul airport for a few days straight and got the worst sunburn I'd ever had in my life as it was. By that point June, I think, and Kabul is a mile up, the air is thinner and you can fry to a crisp if you're not careful.

The operation was a success. Everybody was extremely happy with how it unfolded. And then it proceeded on to a one year later, the Constitutional Roy Jurgica, because once Karzai had been put into power and there was a cabinet, Karzai would rule by decree. There was no formalised document that formed the government and how it would function. What the legislative or executive or judicial responsibilities would be, et cetera, et cetera. And that would be the job for the constitutional jirga which happened in 2004, over the New Year of 2003, included in early 2004. But that's a story for another time, but it was certainly one of the more interesting experiences I've had working on various elections. I've worked in Kosovo and Bosnia as well. This is the one that was that, to my mind, had the greatest importance of where, if it didn't go right, there could be disaster that would follow. But also where it was much more of a Wild West of where just get something done and as long as nobody gets hurt, it doesn't matter. The point is to pull off the event successfully. There's no procedure that we're working from. It's just to get everybody here, get them to vote and then have everybody get back home safely. And that's what we managed to do. Otherwise, that's all I really have to offer on this one and I'm happy to have contributed to this project.