

Parliament / The National Assembly

Key Facts

- **A Bicameral National Assembly** was instituted by the 2002 Afghan Constitution.
- The National Assembly is comprised of 351 Members in two Houses: the **Wolesi Jirga** and **Meshrano Jirga**.
- **Wolesi Jirga** ("People's Assembly" or Lower House) - 249 members:
 - Members of Parliament (MPs) are elected directly in multi-member constituencies, from among the people (aged 25 and over) for a **5-year term**.
 - The Afghan constitution **guarantees women 25% of the seats**, at two per province. Women currently hold 28%, (US Congress has 17% women-held seats).
- **Meshrano Jirga** ("House of Elders" or Upper House) – 102 members:
 - One-third of members are elected from among **members of district councils for a 3-year term**. District elections did not occur in 2005, so members are currently chosen by provincial councils.
 - One-third of members are elected from **provincial councils for a 4-year term**.
 - One-third of members are **appointed by the President for a 5-year term**, of which 50% (17 members) must be women.

Key Functions and Powers

- **Approval of the Cabinet:** The constitution gives the Lower House considerable power over Cabinet appointments. Cabinet nominees must present themselves for approval by secret ballot. For example, in January this year, the House rejected 11 out of 25 nominees for President Karzai's new cabinet. A further resolution passed by the Lower House has given a 10-day deadline to name the missing ministers.
- **Approval of the Annual Budget:** As in the US, the President must present a fiscal year budget to parliament. In April 2010, the National Assembly rejected the Karzai Administration's proposed budget. Both Lower and Upper Houses unanimously rejected it, citing defects such as 'lack of attention' in the monthly wages of the disabled and families of victims of civil-wars.
- **Lawmaking and Endorsement of Presidential Decree:** Like the US system, the relationship between the legislative and executive branch is dynamic and sometimes tense. For example, in April 2010 the Lower House unanimously rejected a decree by President Karzai that rewrote Afghan election law. The decree sought to give the President total control over appointments to the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC). The Upper House (that is one-third appointed by President Karzai) backed the decree. A compromise has since been reached that allows the President to nominate three out of five ECC officials.

Elections

- The Independent Election Commission (IEC) has postponed this year's **parliamentary elections** by four months until September. Elections were due to take place before 22 May 2010, as mandated by the constitution. The IEC cited a lack of funds, logistical challenges and security concerns for the delay. A **new date of 18 September** has been set, which will hopefully allow time to reform key electoral institutions to deliver parliamentary elections that would be cleaner than the presidential election, which was described as suffering from fraud.
- **Gender Balance:** President Karzai has given the IEC the authority to reallocate parliament seats reserved for women to men in cases where there are not enough female candidates. Analysts worry that if female seats can be reallocated then the election process would be open to intimidation, as conservative groups could discourage participation by female political candidates.

In Quotes

The Afghan parliament, long a bastion of dysfunction and docility, has emerged this spring as a robust check on President Hamid Karzai's power, giving the United States an unlikely ally as it tries to persuade the government here to clean up its act.
[Washington Post](#), 22 April, 2010.

Political Organization

- **The practice of party politics does not exist** in Afghanistan. The Ministry of Justice has officially registered **110 political parties**, but in reality candidates run for election as individuals and once in parliament they tend to act independently. There is no political activity that organizes and groups MPs along official party lines or formal voting blocs.
- However, **caucuses and informal interest groups exist** that gather MPs into loose coalitions within parliament that are formed around individual issues. Yet the capacity to sustain these remains low, with little or no centralized control over MPs' voting behavior.

Background and History

- Afghanistan had **no elected parliament between 1973 and 2005**, during a succession of coups, the Soviet invasion, consequent civil war and Taliban autocratic rule.
- The first parliamentary election since the fall of the Taliban took place on **18 September, 2005**.
- Just over half of the 12.5 million registered Afghan voters took part in the polls. **Over 2,700 candidates** contested seats for the Lower House.
- In **December 2005** Afghanistan's first parliament in more than three decades was sworn in.

Key Questions

- What is the relationship between governors and provincial officials appointed by the President and the nationally-elected members of parliament? What opportunities exist for cooperation and coordination?
- What mechanisms are in place for timely and accurate reporting of parliamentary activity that ensures transparency and accountability?
- What plans are being made to ensure that the district council elections that were not held in the 2005 parliamentary elections can finally take place in the future votes?
- What support is provided to MPs that helps them to successfully represent the interests of their local constituents at the national level?