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Warlords and killers seek re-election to Afghan parliament

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Mohammad Eshaq vividly remembers cowering in a crowded Kabul basement as shellfire raged above, fleeing with his family when his Afshar neighborhood's defenses collapsed and returning a year later to find scores of corpses still moldering in the rubble.

"Some were shot and some died from the rockets," said the 55-year-old sweet shop owner, standing by a mass grave on a sun-baked hillside that he helped fill. "We weren't able to wash them. We just laid them side by side and covered them."

Hundreds of minority Hazara civilians were killed in Afshar in February 1993 in one of the bloodiest chapters of the battle for Kabul, between rival U.S.-armed guerrilla factions that had ousted the Soviet-backed regime the previous year.

The man who directed the onslaught, according to residents and human rights groups, was Abdul Rab Rasoul Sayyaf, an Islamist member of parliament's lower house who's close to U.S.-backed President Hamid Karzai. He's running for re-election from Kabul, and analysts say he could be the next speaker of the lower house.

Sayyaf is among a raft of former guerrilla chieftains and commanders implicated in war crimes who are likely to win re-election Saturday to the 249-seat Wolesi Jirga in polls that are expected to be marred by coercion, fraud and violence.

For many Afghans and human rights groups, these men symbolize the high-level impunity, bad governance and massive corruption that are helping to fuel the growing Taliban-led insurgency.

"If ordinary people had power they wouldn't vote for any of these men. The government is filled with traitors from top to bottom," said Najaf Ali, 57. He lost three family members in the 1993 assault on Afshar by Pashtun and Tajik forces.

That some of Afghanistan's most notorious figures haven't been barred from seeking re-election after last year's fraud-tainted presidential contest underscores for many experts a deeply flawed system for vetting the 2,513 candidates.

"I've serious concerns about the way the vetting process has gone," said Ahmad Nader Nadery, the head of the Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan, an independent poll watchdog.

The U.N. envoy to Afghanistan, Staffan de Mistura, also voiced no confidence in the system.

"The process of vetting has not produced a satisfactory result so far," he said in a July statement.

Ninety percent of the Wolesi Jirga members who were elected in 2005 have been certified to seek re-election. One lawmaker has been disqualified, 15 are retiring and 10 died or were killed while in office.

Yet the winners of the 2005 polls included 40 commanders still associated with armed groups, 24 who belong to criminal gangs, 17 drug traffickers and 19 who face serious allegations of war crimes and human rights violations, according to an analysis cited in a 2005 report by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, an independent research center.

A second, bleaker analysis by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission cited in the report found that more than 80 percent of provincial lawmakers and more than 60 percent of those elected in Kabul had "links to armed groups."

"One of the biggest threats to Afghanistan's political stability and future comes from individuals who have committed serious human rights abuses," warned a 2005 Human Rights Watch report on the 1992-93 fighting in Kabul that implicated Sayyaf along with other top politicians and officials, including one of Karzai's two vice presidents, Mohammad Qasim Fahim. "To achieve long-term stability, the government will ultimately have to address the continuing threat from these individuals."

However, none of the former guerrilla chieftains and commanders, whom the George W. Bush administration rehabilitated and paid millions to help oust the Taliban and al Qaida

in 2001, has faced criminal trial or been scrutinized by a South Africa-type truth commission.

A truth commission proposal, pushed by the United States and its allies as a way to assuage public demands for accountability, was quietly dropped amid resistance from Karzai. Citing the need for national unity, Karzai signed a bill in 2007 that granted amnesty to the former guerrilla chiefs and their followers.

The bill, which parliament passed secretly, was championed by Sayyaf, who denounced critics as being "against Islam" and "enemies of this country."

The electoral vetting system is supposed to disqualify candidates with links to private militias, or "illegal armed groups," that could be used to intimidate voters and hijack polling stations.

The Electoral Complaints Commission, which adjudicates alleged election law violations, announced the disqualification of 36 candidates in July and added eight others as they campaigned earlier this month.

The commission, however, didn't make those determinations. Officials from the Interior and Defense ministries, the National Directorate of Security — Afghanistan's top intelligence agency — and the Independent Election Commission decided them in secret.

Political activists and election experts, citing the lack of transparency, charged that there's no proof that those who were disqualified are tied to militias, while men who should have been excluded were given passes.

"A majority of the seats in parliament will belong to photocopies of Sayyaf," asserted Malalai Joya. Her fierce denunciations of Karzai and "warlords and drug lords" in parliament prompted her expulsion from her Farah province seat in 2007 in what many experts say was an unconstitutional action by the lower house. The chamber also lifted her official passport and banned her from talking to the media, which she refused to heed.

Joya, who's also an outspoken critic of U.S. policy in Afghanistan, contended that many lawmakers' police bodyguards are members of personal militias, and she called the candidate vetting process "just symbolic."

Numerous calls to a Electoral Complaints Commission spokesman requesting comment went unanswered.