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Concept plan of the proposed Afghan Parliament building — as viewed from the Darul Aman Palace — that is to be built by India.

## Proposed Afghan Parliament to be built by India

**A**s the Afghan Parliament held its inaugural meeting in December in the hurriedly patched up old building that had been destroyed during the war, the focus once again shifted to the proposed new building that India is to build for the country.

The foundation of the new building was laid by Baba-e-Millat King Zahir Shah in the presence of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during his visit to Kabul in August last year.

The building will have three halls — one each for the Wolesi Jirga and Mushrano Jirga, and a large Central Hall.

It will have large galleries, lobbies, a President's Chamber, separate chambers for the Speakers, Deputy Speakers, Ministers and leaders of the two houses and the Opposition, committee rooms, media galleries, viewers galleries, prayer hall, dining hall, a library, an auditorium and ample parking facilities.

At the foundation stone laying ceremony of the new building, Prime Minister Singh had said: "Today, as Baba-e-Millat lays the foundation stone of the Parliament of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the roots of a plant are being laid that will, through your nurturing and care, grow into a sturdy *panja chinar* of democracy."

"Representation is the very essence of democracy. This edifice, when it is built, will be the very heart of democracy in Afghanistan. We believe that democratic institutions need to be encouraged, nursed and promoted... By a happy coincidence, 26th of January, the India Republic Day, also marks the day when the Afghan Constitution came into effect."

## Newly elected MPs hold inaugural session of Parliament

**H**istory was created when the newly elected Afghan Parliament — revived after 30 years — held its inaugural meeting on December 19 in Kabul amid robust optimism about the future of the fledgling democracy in the country.

Underlining the spirit of this historic occasion, Afghan President Hamid Karzai told 351 Members of Parliament (MPs) that the session was a "step toward democracy" and an affirmation of national unity. "Let me tell the world that Afghanistan is rising from the ashes of invasion and will live forever," said Karzai.

"This meeting is a sign of us regaining our honour," he said.

"We have the right to tell those who are after the destruction of this water and soil that this homeland will exist forever!" he said, bringing tears to the eyes of many delegates.

Karzai urged national reconciliation and reiterated a call to the Taliban to abandon their insurgency.

"This gathering shows that all of the people of Afghanistan are unified. This is an important step toward democracy," he added.

The session was attended by 351

MPs — 249 belonging to Wolesi Jirga, the Lower House, and 102 members of Mushrano Jirga, the Upper House — amidst tight security and spirited debate on procedural matters.

**Mohammad Younus Qanuni, an ethnic Tajik who was the main rival to Karzai in the Presidential elections last year and the runner-up in the race, was narrowly elected as Chairman of the Lower House on December 21.**

Of the 249 seats in the Lower House, 68 seats were reserved for women.

"Today was a very good day," Kubra Mustafawi, one of the Assembly's women, was quoted as saying. "After 30 years, the Afghan nation has gathered under the umbrella of peace."

The inauguration ceremony of the

bicameral Parliament was attended by about 50 foreign dignitaries.

On the first day of Parliament, former President Sibghatullah Mujadadi, considered close to President Karzai, was elected as president of the Upper House.

Mohammad Younus Qanuni, an ethnic Tajik who was the main rival to Karzai in the Presidential elections last year and runner-up in the race, was narrowly elected as Chairman of the Lower House on December 21.

He later resigned as Leader of the Opposition and announced his support for President Karzai's efforts to rebuild the country after a quarter century of war.

The landmark, first-ever parliamentary elections in 36 years — which was largely free of violence and monitored by international observers — was held on September 18 last year in which the Afghan people from all 34 provinces participated enthusiastically and elected 351 MPs.

Many of the new MPs are former Mujahideen commanders and there are also some former Taliban and Communist leaders among the deputies.

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