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Senior Afghan minister to receive honorary degree

By Andrea Hahn

CARBONDALE, Ill. — The Southern Illinois University Board of Trustees, meeting today (Jan. 17) in Edwardsville, approved an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters for Hedayat Amin-Arsala, an SIU Carbondale alumnus and a senior minister of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

Amin-Arsala will receive his honor during the May 2008 commencement ceremonies for the SIUC College of Liberal Arts.

Amin-Arsala was born in 1942 and raised in Kabul, Afghanistan. After high school, he came to the United States. He earned a bachelor's degree (1968) and a master's degree (1969) in economics from SIUC – with, as he phrased it, "a heavy dose of political science and international relations." He also completed requirements for doctoral candidacy in economics at George Washington University.

His professional career began in 1969, when he began working for the World Bank in the Young Professionals Program. He went on to serve in several economic and senior operational posts there.

In 1987, he left the World Bank to join the Afghan resistance against Soviet occupation. He served as senior adviser and as a member of the Supreme Council of the Afghan Unity of Mujahideen. In 1989, he became minister of finance for the Afghan Interim Government in exile. In 1993, he became foreign minister in post-communist Afghanistan.

Five years later, in 1998, he was a member of the executive council of the Afghan Grand National Assembly, the Loya Jirga. The group worked for a peaceful solution to internal conflicts in Afghanistan, seeking to establish a broad-based government. Former Afghan King Mohammed Zahir Shah appointed Amin-Arsala as a senior member of this peace effort.

In 2001, Amin-Arsala played a key role at the Bonn Conference, held after the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan. At that conference, Hamid Karzai became chairman of the interim administration and Amin-Arsala became vice chairman and minister of finance. The Loya Jirga met in June 2002 to create a transitional government to prepare the nation for elections. Karzai was president, and he appointed Amin-Arsala as vice president. He also headed the Independent Civil Services Administrative Reform Commission as well as serving on the National Census Commission, the Coordination Council and the National Security Council.

Amin-Arsala continues to represent Afghanistan at international conferences. He is fluent in Pashto, Dari, Urdu and English and has familiarity with several other languages. He is married to Betsy Thomas Amin-Arsala, and has three children. Amin-Arsala met his wife – also an SIUC graduate – when she was serving in the Peace Corps. They were married in Jackson County, and celebrated a Muslim wedding at the SIUC Student Center.

In 2006, the SIU Alumni Association named Amin-Arsala an Outstanding Alumnus.

In a letter of recommendation nominating Amin-Arsala for an honorary degree, Alan Vaux, dean of the College of Liberal Arts, wrote, "Clearly, his education at SIUC provided an important foundation for an extraordinary career and life."

In the summer of 2006, in a letter describing his days at the University, Amin-Arsala wrote that he "always cherished and fondly remembered" his time at SIUC.

"As Foreign Minister of Afghanistan, delivering a speech at the UN General Assembly, or speaking in summits and other international conferences as Vice President of Afghanistan, I have thought of my days at SIU and the meetings we used to have," he wrote. "I had many good classmates and friends in SIU."