

Warlords¹ and Karzai's Balancing Act

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On March 1, 2005, Afghan President Hamid Karzai appointed Uzbek militia commander Abdul Rashid Dostum as Chief-of-Staff to the Commander-in-Chief of the Afghan armed forces – a post which he holds.² For those who know and understand the politics of Afghanistan, such a development was hardly surprising. Ever since Karzai assumed the chairmanship of the interim administration in December 2001, Kabul has not been able to assert full authority over its provinces. Much of the country remains parcelled out among various regional and factional commanders, who often have large private armies. The *mujahideen* commanders have shown tremendous survival instinct if one goes through the annals of the Afghan conflict. After 9/11 when the US launched Operation Enduring Freedom and decided to vanquish the Taliban, it had to align with the militia commanders of the Northern Alliance. With the displacement of the Taliban, the *mujahideen* commanders made a quick comeback and were soon working with the UN in Bonn in late November 2001 to prepare a roadmap for peace and democracy in Afghanistan. Time and again, the *mujahideen* have proved to be an abiding factor in Afghan politics. Despite all claims of not working with the warlords if elected President, Karzai has not been able to keep them out of his new cabinet or break their stranglehold on the Afghan political structure.

Revival of *Mujahideen* Power

With the Taliban controlling three-fourths of the country, except areas controlled by Tajik Commander Ahmed Shah Masud in the north-eastern provinces of Badakhshan and Takhar, most of the *mujahideen* commanders had either sought refuge in neighbouring countries or were on the run. The ouster of the Taliban by mid-November 2001 not only facilitated the return of the *mujahideen* but also led to reworking of their relationship with the US-led coalition. In the absence of any other credible local force, the US-led coalition had to turn to the *mujahideen*, particularly the Tajik militia which till date remains the most organised of all groups, to launch an offensive against the Taliban and their Al Qaida allies. With the US

Strategic Analysis, Vol. 29, No. 1, Jan-Mar 2005

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launching a heavy air offensive on Taliban strongholds in the south and south-eastern Afghanistan, the Northern Alliance commanders led the ground offensive from the north and took control of Kabul on November 13, 2001.

Soon negotiations followed under UN auspices in Bonn on November 27, 2001, seeking to chart out a roadmap for establishing peace and stability in Afghanistan. The very fact that the *mujahideen* were the key constituents of the parleys that ultimately led to the signing of the ‘Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-establishment of Permanent Governing Institutions’³ on December 5, 2001, bears testimony to their position in Afghan politics. Their key role and position was ensured in the provisional governments that followed in Kabul. Their overbearing presence was apparent all through the phase of provisional governments and remains so, though currently not as pronounced as before, in the newly elected government of President Karzai.

Keeping the various diverse constituents of the provisional governments together must have been a challenging task before Hamid Karzai and his US and UN backers. The *mujahideen* domination in post-Taliban provisional governments, along with their whole gamut of ideological differences and interest disparities, continued to lend fragility to the Bonn-mandated political process. The Pashtun-Northern Alliance divide, a legacy of Afghan history and over two decades of ethnic power struggle, has percolated down to the Karzai-led provisional governments and was well-reflected during the Constitutional *Loya Jirga*⁴ as well as in the run-up to the presidential elections held on October 9, 2004. That elections would be fought along ethnic lines was an anticipated fact.

Warlords and the Presidential Elections

Due to the deteriorating security situation, incomplete voter registration and various logistical deficiencies, elections were twice postponed – first from June to September and then to October 2004. Compelled by the enormity of the challenge in holding such a huge nationwide electoral exercise, the UN-Afghan Joint Electoral Management Body of Afghanistan decided on July 9, 2004, to go ahead with the presidential elections in October 2004, postponing the parliamentary elections until April-May 2005. But it is clear that the impediments to the presidential election continue to be in play, as parliamentary elections have already been delayed till mid-September this year.

In the run-up to the presidential elections, Karzai tried to break away from the hold of *mujahideen* warlords by way of his greater political assertion. He tried to

sideline them and weaken their electoral prospects, particularly the minority ethnic factions of the former Northern Alliance. The removal of the self-styled ‘*Amir*’ and powerful governor of the western province of Herat, Ismail Khan, and dropping of his powerful defence minister and leader of Tajik militia, Mohammad Qasim Fahim, as his vice-presidential running mate just before the elections, should be seen in this context. Karzai attempted to strike an ethnic balance and at the same time cut into the vote constituencies of Tajik candidate Yunus Qanooni and Hazara candidate Mohammad Mohaqqiq by nominating Ahmed Zia Masud, brother of late Tajik Commander Ahmed Shah Masud, and Hazara leader Mohammad Karim Khalili, as his vice-presidential nominees. The main objective was to pre-empt the ethnic bloc voting in the north. Karzai could not have relied completely on his Pashtun constituency where he had a limited appeal, and also because of relatively low voter registration in the predominantly Pashtun south and south-eastern provinces. With Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras having declared their own presidential candidates, the ethnic divisions were complete.

In the October 9, 2004 presidential elections, Karzai’s victory was a foregone conclusion. However, belying expectations, Karzai secured 55.4 per cent of the total votes polled, with Tajik candidate Yunus Qanooni the distant second at 16.3 per cent, followed by Hazara and Uzbek candidates, Mohammad Mohaqqiq and Abdul Rashid Dostum at third (11.7 per cent) and fourth (10.3 per cent) positions respectively.⁵

Most of the election candidates, if not all, were either the *mujahideen* warlords or proxies of one or the other ethnic factions. Of the top four presidential candidates, Mohaqqiq and Dostum are known militia commanders. Similarly, Qanooni had the full backing of the powerful Tajik militia leader and former defence minister Mohammad Qasim Fahim. Thus, the influence of *mujahideen* leaders and commanders, and the ethnic pattern of voting as witnessed in the presidential elections, speaks volumes about the possible political complexion that is likely to emerge in the run-up to parliamentary elections.

Poppy Boom and *Mujahideen* Activism

Following the restoration of the *mujahideen* power after the ouster of the Taliban, one notices a sudden spurt in opium poppy production. The linkage between the warlords, local commanders, poppy cultivators and heroin traders apparently runs deep in Afghanistan. Drug money plays a very crucial role in financing and sustaining warlordism in the country. It provides warlords with the necessary financial resources to maintain huge private militias and also to run the local economy.

Many of these warlords or their proxies, who encouraged poppy production in the regions they control, often held senior positions in the Karzai-led provisional governments. Added to this, Karzai's and the West's dependency on these warlords in keeping the Bonn-mandated political process going has been a major restraining factor in the fight against the drug menace in Afghanistan. The contradictions in the US' twin objectives of counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics in Afghanistan have been apparent all through these three years.

Poppy production in the country has been growing unabated since 2002. Except for the year 2001, when poppy production plummeted to a mere 185 metric tonnes from 3,276 metric tonnes the previous year, largely due to a strict ban imposed by the Taliban that year, Afghanistan has been providing almost three-quarters of the world's total illicit opium production. According to the Afghan Opium Survey 2004 released by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC), production grew from 3,600 metric tonnes in 2003 to 4,200 metric tonnes in 2004, an increase of about 17 per cent and the highest since the year 2000. The total area under opium poppy cultivation registered a staggering growth of 64 per cent, from about 80,000 hectares in 2003 to a record level of 131,000 hectares in 2004. Poppy is now being grown in all 34 provinces, up from 28 provinces in the year 2003, with Helmand, Nangarhar, and Badakhshan leading the tally. The drug trade in the country is currently valued at \$2.8 billion, up by more than 20 per cent since 2003. The opium economy of Afghanistan is now almost 60 per cent of its 2003 gross domestic product which was US \$4.6 billion.⁶

Challenges of Disarmament

The UN-led and Japan-sponsored Disarmament, Demobilisation and Rehabilitation Programme (DDR), launched in 2003, is very crucial in diluting the powers of the warlords by disbanding their militia and integrating them into the upcoming Afghan national army and police force. So far, the programme cannot be said to have been very effective. Though the UN claims that nearly 80 per cent of the estimated 50,000 militiamen have been covered under the programme,⁷ scepticism remains. Most of the warlords, particularly those having militia running into several thousands, have so far resisted any disbandment of their militia or surrender of heavy weaponry. It is notable that warlords who were party to the Bonn Agreement and later held positions in the provisional governments too remain disavowed to the programme. In fact, the DDR has never been high in the order of priority for various compulsive factors. The US-led coalition's continued dependence on various Afghan militias, officially designated as Afghan Military Force, in its operations against the Taliban and its allies in the south and south-

eastern provinces, has been a limiting factor. Apart from this, in the absence of an effective national army and limited peacekeeping by the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), it is unlikely that the DDR will be effective.

Karzai's Balancing Act

Karzai had declared right before the presidential elections that the biggest threat to Afghanistan is from the warlords and had promised the Afghan people that he would not work with them if elected president. In the run-up to the elections, he did try to sideline them and has since been relatively politically assertive. But at the same time, realising the socio-political complexities of the country and his own fragile position in the Afghan political structure, he has been cautious in confronting the regional strongmen and *mujahideen* commanders. In fact, Karzai has been striving for some kind of an understanding with them so as to secure his position as well as to carry forward the peace and reconstruction efforts. Given his limited authority and resource constraints, Karzai and the international community are more than aware of the need to accommodate the warlords despite all rhetoric.

It appears that Karzai and his western backers are eager to keep the powerful militia commanders away from Kabul and at the same time engage them by appointing them in the provinces. For instance, Karzai appointed two warlords and his former ministerial colleagues, Gul Agha Sherzai and Syed Hussain Anwari, as governors of Kandahar and Kabul, respectively. Karzai had previously removed them along with his defence minister Mohammad Qasim Fahim from his transitional government in the run-up to the presidential elections. Similarly, the removal of Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani had more to do with mollifying the *mujahideen*, who were opposed to his policies and to his proximity with the West. The appointment of Ismail Khan in the new cabinet as energy minister sends two clear messages across the country. First, it is expected of the extra-constitutional authorities in the provinces to accept the authority of Kabul. If a warlord does this, he is likely to be rewarded with a position in the government, appropriate to his previous rank. Secondly, Kabul is ready to work with the factional warlords and commanders if the latter are ready to relinquish their military role and take to a civilian role within the purview of constitutional provisions. Clearly, President Karzai is striving hard to strike a balance between the political aspirations of the *mujahideen* warlords and the necessity to have more qualified and capable people in the cabinet to carry forward the reforms. Karzai has also time and again reiterated that the Taliban and their Hizb-e-Islami allies are welcome to participate in the political

process and contribute to the ongoing reforms and reconstruction in the country.

During the negotiations preceding the announcement of a new cabinet on December 23, 2004, Karzai unsuccessfully tried to persuade his Tajik presidential rival and former ministerial colleague, Yunus Qanooni, to accept a position in his government, probably that of the defence minister.⁸ Karzai has certainly kept doors open for the leaders of the Panjshiri faction. Given his limited authority and the political influence and power of the Tajik militia, Karzai is well aware of the fact that at some stage his government will have to compromise with the Panjshiri leadership, without which Kabul would not be able to extend its authority in the northern areas. The Karzai Government has already announced special lifetime privileges for the leader of the Tajik militia and his former defence minister Mohammad Qasim Fahim, allowing him to retain his military rank of Marshal life-long with all military rights and privileges.⁹

The new cabinet announced by President Karzai is certainly going to witness many reshuffles in course of time. The cabinet right now has many new faces, mostly professionals and technocrats, and has a dominant Pashtun presence. Only two members of the previous cabinet have retained their posts – Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah and Interior Minister Ali Ahmed Jalali – in the 27-member cabinet. Karzai will have to cut deals with the powerful warlords from the minority ethnic groups, particularly Mohammad Qasim Fahim, Yunus Qanooni and Mohammad Mohaqqiq in the run-up to parliamentary elections. The recent appointment of Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum as Chief of Staff can be seen as a step in that direction and an indication of the hard bargain that lies ahead.

Warlords will remain central to Afghan society and politics so long as Afghanistan fails to establish functional institutions of governance across the country. The Karzai Government will have to speed up reconstruction and the reforms process in order to bolster its presence in the provinces. The international community too will have to be prepared for a long-term engagement in Afghanistan. Disarmament and counter-narcotics efforts will have to be prioritised to dilute the power of extra-constitutional authorities in the provinces. However, in the absence of a credible national army, law enforcement agencies and an independent judiciary, it is unlikely that Kabul would be able to assert its authority to the provinces in the near future. Until then, the warlords would remain embedded in their near-independent fiefdoms, with Kabul dependent on their cooperation to maintain some semblance of Afghan statehood.

References/Endnotes

- ¹ The term warlord, militia commander, regional commander, factional commander, *mujahideen* commander and regional strongmen have been used inter-changeably as there is no fixed term of address for the same.
- ² Golnaz Esfandiari, “Powerful Commander Gets High-Ranking Military Post”, RFE/RL Afghanistan Report, 4 (8), March 7, 2005, at <http://www.rferl.org/reports/afghan-report/>; Amin Tarzi, “Afghan President Appoints Northern Warlord As His Chief Of Staff” at <http://www.azadiradio.org/en/dailyreport/2005/03/02.asp>
- ³ The text of the agreement is available at <http://www.uno.de/frieden/afghanistan/talks/agreement.htm>
- ⁴ Constitutional Loya Jirga was convened to ratify the draft Constitution. The session started on December 14, 2003, and went on till January 4, 2004, when the Constitution was finally ratified by the Jirga.
- ⁵ Final results of the Afghan presidential election declared by the Joint Electoral Management Body of Afghanistan on November 3, 2004, is available at <http://www.elections-afghanistan.org.af/Election%20Results%20Webiste/english/english.htm>.
- ⁶ See Afghanistan Opium Survey 2004 released by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes and the Counter Narcotics Directorate of the Government of Afghanistan in November 2004 at http://www.unodc.org/pdf/afg/afghanistan_opium_survey_2004.pdf
- ⁷ See, “Afghanistan Disarms 80 Percent of Country’s 50,000 Militiamen” at <http://www.paktribune.com/news/index.php?id=94608>
- ⁸ Amin Tarzi, “Afghan President Faces Challenges in Forming Cabinet”, RFE/RL Afghanistan Report, 3 (45), December 23, 2004, at <http://www.rferl.org/reports/afghan-report/2004/12/45-231204.asp>
- ⁹ See, “Former Defense Minister Gets Special Privileges” at <http://www.azadiradio.org/en/weeklyreport/2004/12/30.asp#241572>

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