

In Afghanistan's New Government, Disturbing Signs Of Divisiveness

Cabinet appointments stir rivalries that may hinder stability and War On Terror

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By Ahmed Rashid/ Lahore

Afghanistan finally has a new government for the next 18 months, but it is one that could exacerbate ethnic rivalries long at the heart of the country's political instability.

President Hamid Karzai, newly chosen by a special assembly to lead a transitional government, has appointed a cabinet that bolsters the political and military power of the already dominant Tajik faction, from the Panjshir valley in the country's north-central region. It also strengthens regional warlords whose influence many at the assembly, known as a *loya jirga*, had hoped to minimize. Meanwhile, the new cabinet marginalizes the country's majority Pashtun faction -- Mr. Karzai's own -- though Pashtuns retain the crucial economic ministries through which foreign aid may flow.

The composition of the 29-member cabinet is expected to strengthen support for hard-line Pashtun nationalists and Islamic fundamentalists, among them remnants of the ousted Taliban regime who see the Panjshiri Tajiks as a threat and consider Mr. Karzai too close to the U.S. Such a development could exacerbate instability and insecurity, some fear, complicating the U.S.-led war against terrorism and preventing the central government from extending its writ across the country. If ethnic rifts widen, some Western donor countries may balk at extending funds to the country.

The three Panjshiri Tajiks who formed the most powerful clique in the six-month interim cabinet that expired last week retain the most important posts. Gen. Mohammed Fahim remains Defense Minister and head of the army, while also becoming one of three vice presidents. Abdullah Abdullah remains foreign minister, while Yunus Qanooni, the former interior minister, becomes a special adviser for internal security as well as education minister. Gen. Fahim, like the other two vice presidents, is a warlord who once served the Panjshiri-led Northern Alliance, which helped oust the Taliban last year.

The appointments have created widespread dismay not only among Afghans but also among foreign officials who hoped that after the massive endorsement Mr. Karzai received at last week's *loya jirga*, where warlords came under heavy criticism, he would be able to distance himself from them.

"By these appointments, Karzai and the Panjshiris have made more enemies than they had before," said a European diplomat in Kabul. "Karzai has only demonstrated his weakness and his inability to take hard decisions, which will increase instability outside Kabul and infuriate the Pashtuns." A Pashtun former cabinet minister said the appointments show that Mr. Karzai "is still a hostage to the Panjshiris."

Even Mr. Karzai's own advisers expressed disappointment with the cabinet. "The popular will expressed in the *loya jirga* was an end to warlordism and a demotion of the Panjshiris," said one. "But Karzai has done just the opposite."

The most controversial appointment is Mr. Qanooni's. He had resigned as interior minister at the opening of the *loya jirga* to "pave the way for national unity," so Mr. Karzai replaced him with Taj Mohammed Wardak. But people close to the situation say that when the ministry's largely Panjshiri police and intelligence service refused to accept the Pashtun Mr. Wardak, Mr. Karzai gave in and made Mr. Qanooni security adviser, ensuring that he will continue running the services from behind the scenes. Mr. Wardak, an elderly naturalized American who returned from California this year, has pledged to resign in seven months if he has not produced a professional police force by then, but most observers doubt that he will command much respect from within the ministry.

And in a worrying sign of divisions to come, Mr. Qanooni told reporters yesterday that he had not yet decided whether to accept the two posts, and instead may set up a multi-ethnic opposition party that would be the first challenge to Mr. Karzai from within the administration. He also challenged the legitimacy of the 16

cabinet positions Mr. Karzai filled Saturday, three days after the loya jirga adjourned. "Hamid Karzai as head of state enjoys full legitimacy, but part of the cabinet does not have the confirmation of the loya jirga and so is not legitimate," he told reporters.

One piece of consolation for the Pashtuns: They retain the key economic ministries, and aides to Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani say control of the purse strings will allow Pashtun ministers to counter Panjshiri influence.

But that depends on whether aid inflows pick up significantly. Western donors have pledged \$1.8 billion this year, but only a quarter of that has arrived.

Mr. Karzai's aides say he gave key posts to the warlords to encourage them to leave their fiefs and come to Kabul. But he has failed to co-opt the country's two most powerful warlords, Uzbek Gen. Rashid Dostum in the north and Tajik Gen. Ismail Khan in the west, settling instead for appointing their representatives to the cabinet.

The alienation of the Pashtuns could complicate matters for the U.S.-led antiterror forces in the country's largely Pashtun east, where British marines on Saturday discovered one of the largest arms caches yet found in the country, one they think was left by al Qaeda or Taliban forces. Many Pashtun military leaders, armed and funded by the U.S. to help find al Qaeda holdouts, are now doubly embittered. On the eve of the loya jirga, the U.S. effectively blocked any political role for former king Mohammad Zahir Shah, a Pashtun icon and symbol of national unity; now, the U.S.-backed Mr. Karzai has boosted their Panjshiri rivals.

"The Americans and Karzai are pushing the Pashtuns to once again seek support from Pakistan," said a Pashtun delegate to the loya jirga. Pakistan's Interservices Intelligence has long supported the Afghan Pashtuns, including the Pashtun-dominated Taliban regime, while Iran and Russia have backed the Northern Alliance. Although all three countries now support Mr. Karzai, widening ethnic divisions could invite the neighbors -- particularly Iran and Pakistan -- to resume self-interested meddling in Afghan affairs.

Mr. Karzai already faces a crisis in northern Afghanistan, where fighting between Gen. Dostum and Gen. Fahim's representative, Panjshiri Gen. Mohamed Atta, has prompted a group of 70 relief agencies to seek an extension of international peace-keeping forces from Kabul to the northern capital, Mazar-e-Sharif. U.N. officials say dozens of relief agencies have already pulled out of the country and "others are seriously considering withdrawal" in light of attacks on them.

Meanwhile, in a move that some in Kabul see as linked to the heightened political tensions, Abu Ghaith, a spokesman for al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, claimed yesterday that Mr. bin Laden is well and will soon deliver a videotaped speech to the Muslim world. Mr. Ghaith's audiotaped message, whose authenticity could not be verified, was broadcast by Al Jazeera, the Qatar-based television station. Mr. Ghaith also claimed that al Qaeda was behind April's attack on a synagogue in Tunis, Tunisia, that killed 17 people.

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