

THE END OF AN ERA? THE DEATH OF MARSHAL MOHAMMAD QASIM FAHIM

The death of First Vice President Marshal Qasim Fahim will have an even bigger impact on the aftermath of the forthcoming presidential election than on its outcome.

A consensus view has emerged from the slew of obituaries issuing forth in the wake of Afghanistan's First Vice President Marshal Mohammad Qasim Fahim's demise: his death has left a significant void.¹ What form we can expect that void will take or how long it might take to be filled are questions left largely unanswered by the rush of media attention in the wake of his passing on March 9. His sudden departure has introduced three significant uncertainties into Afghanistan's political landscape at a very crucial time: the selection of the next interim Vice President, the event's impact on the outcome of the forthcoming presidential elections in a few short weeks, and the future of the fractious Northern Alliance and its influential Tajik-dominated political party, Jamiat-i Islami. Speculation is already running rampant on the implications of his death for the first two of these three struggles for political control; in the longer-term, this third struggle will be the most critical to watch. The following sections analyze the impact of Fahim's death on the upcoming presidential elections and the larger role his void might play in the future of the fractured Northern Alliance. An investigation of both counts makes clear that the death of First Vice President Marshal Qasim Fahim will have an even bigger impact on the aftermath of the forthcoming presidential election than on its outcome.

FAHIM AND THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

The relative openness of the presidential field has produced a collective belief that the demise of the Afghan First Vice President will have a significant impact on the outcome of the Afghan election. Given Fahim's vast network in Kabul and across the northern provinces, his leadership of the ethnic Tajik minority, and his influence within the more cohesive elements of the Afghan security apparatus, such a conclusion appears logical. This collective sense has been heightened by indications that Fahim was privately supporting Dr. Abdullah Abdullah's candidacy; indeed, Abdullah is widely expected to suffer the most from Fahim's departure.² As the only Tajik presidential candidate and as a fellow Panjshiri with a solid pedigree from Jamiat-i Islami, Abdullah might easily have

been Fahim's natural preference. The other major Tajik figure in the race, Ahmad Zia Masoud, presently running as Zalmai Rasoul's First Vice Presidential candidate, replaced Fahim on the 2004 Karzai presidential ticket and had in the past vied with him for leadership of the Panjshiri faction of Ahmad Shah Masoud's former party. As far back as September of last year, Fazl Rahmand Oria, a spokesperson for Abdullah's National Coalition of Afghanistan (NCA) party, triumphantly announced that Fahim had pledged his early support to Abdullah's campaign.³ Upon Fahim's death, Abdullah aides issued self-serving affirmations to the press that "since Marshal Fahim's supporters are aware that he (Fahim) threw his weight behind Abdullah in the coming elections they will cast their votes in Abdullah's favor."⁴

In December 2013, the United States government indicated it had plans to sponsor a series of nine polls conducted by three polling companies over the course of the Afghan election period. Formalized polling is a relatively new phenomenon in Afghanistan and one whose impact on the outcome of the election is at present very hard to predict. Two of the polls securing the most attention in recent months, one by Democracy International and another by the popular Afghan Tolo News Channel in conjunction with ATR Consulting, found former Foreign Minister Dr. Abdullah Abdullah leading the race, closely followed by Dr. Ashraf Ghani. Both polls indicate that a run-off among the field of candidates is likely. Abdullah won 31 percent of the vote among 2,500 Afghans surveyed in the Democracy International poll and approximately 27 percent in the less methodologically rigorous but more locally popular Tolo survey.⁵ Afghan Independent Election Commission (IEC) officials have confirmed their suspicions in this regard: Yusuf Nuristani, Chairman of the Commission, stated there was a 50 percent chance that a presidential run-off would be required in late May or early June. Nuristani singled out four of the eleven candidates — former Foreign Ministers Abdullah Abdullah and Zalmai Rassoul, former Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani, and former Islamist warlord Abdul Rasoul Sayyaf — as likely to garner the most votes.⁶

However, rumors that leading contenders such as Zalmay Rasoul and Ashraf Ghani were also courting Fahim's patronage in the weeks before his death — and Fahim's own reticence to publicly confirm his preference — suggest that his loyalties were far from fixed. History is instructive in this regard. Fahim withdrew his support for Abdullah's candidacy in the 2009 presidential race after striking a political bargain with President Karzai, one that eventually led to his being placed on the winning ticket.⁷ In the ensuing years, the First Vice President remained closely tied to the Karzai family through an intricate web of business and financial partnerships led by their respective brothers, Mahmoud Karzai and Haseen Fahim.⁸ If President Karzai indeed favors Zalmay Rasoul — a rumor that has gained currency in the past few weeks due to his brother Qayum's departure from the contest and his announced alliance with Rasoul — Fahim's preference for Abdullah would have placed the sitting President and First Vice President on different sides of what could evolve into a highly contested three-way presidential race among Abdullah, Ghani, and Rasoul.⁹

Fahim's close affiliation with the country's central state apparatus and his longstanding desire to consolidate his power in that regard suggest his interest in the electoral process had much to do with cementing his authority in the next administration, whatever the outcome.¹⁰ In an article for *Al-Jazeera*, Ahmad Wali Masoud, younger brother to Vice Presidential candidate Zia Masoud and the slain anti-Soviet resistance leader Ahmad Shah Masoud, observed:

It is true that Fahim has not always been a supporter of Dr Abdullah, a former comrade-in-arms during the jihad against the Soviets. But in the country's second presidential election, he announced his support. If he had allied himself with Karzai during the last decade, it was probably because they had come to a pragmatic arrangement. And if Karzai is not in the running, who should he have supported? Fahim's endorsement of Dr Abdullah's campaign, in the days before he died, shows that his vision for Afghanistan has never wavered.¹¹

Such an observation assumes that Fahim's predilection for "pragmatic arrangements" would have ceased with the conclusion of a Karzai presidency. Wali Masoud refers to the same months-old assertion by the National Coalition's spokesman to justify Fahim's unstinting support for Abdullah's campaign. However, a close or fraudulent presidential run-off come April will likely produce an election outcome that is decided behind closed doors and not in the voting booth. "Pragmatic arrangements" in such a context are the lifeblood of modern Afghan politics. There is a reason none of the principal contenders had given up their courtship of Fahim's favor.

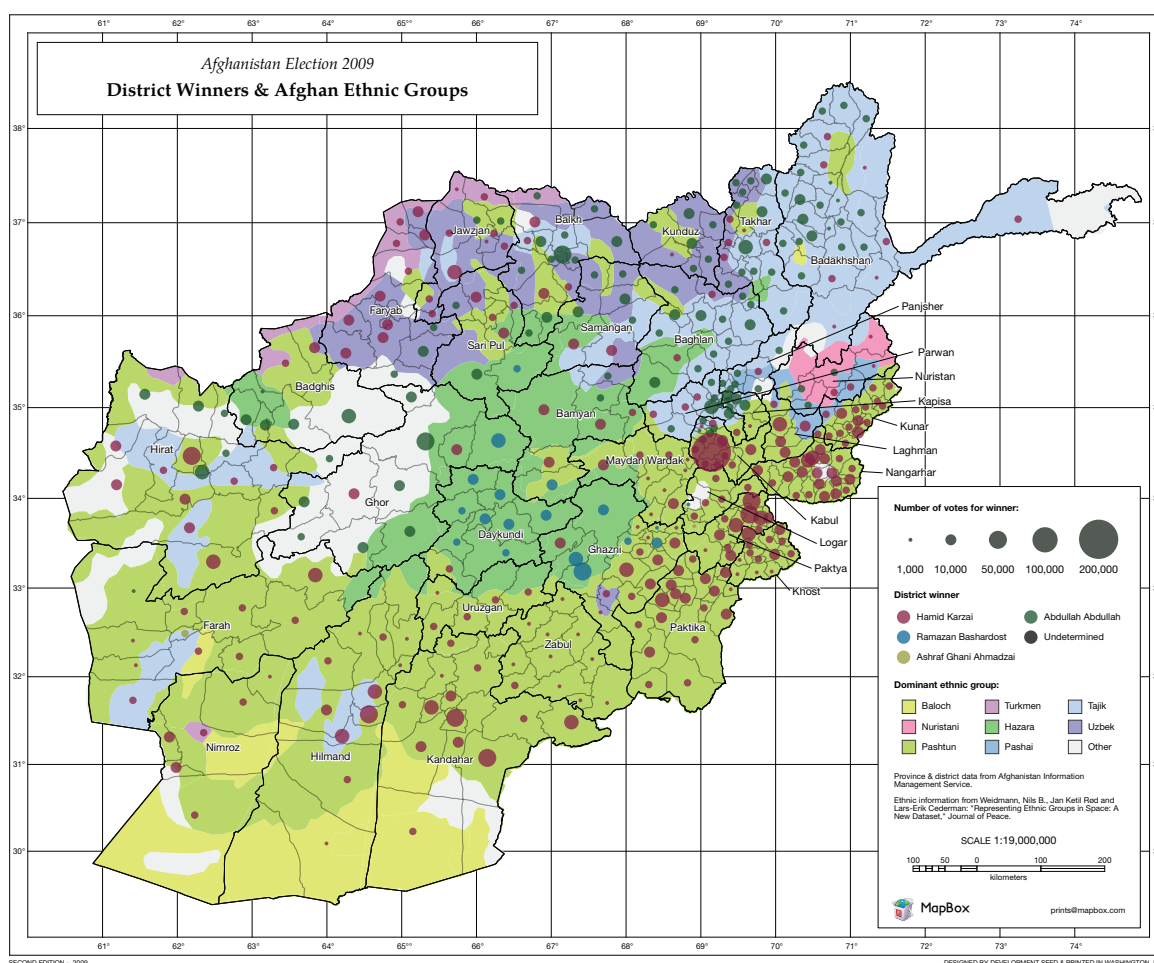
The view that Fahim's preference for Abdullah was vital to his electoral campaign also overlooks the voting data from the previous two presidential elections. When Fahim threw his support to Yunus Qanooni after the former was dropped



Afghan President Hamid Karzai (C) prays over the flag-covered coffin of Afghan Vice-President Marshal Mohammad Qasim Fahim during the burial ceremony at the Presidential Palace in Kabul March 11, 2014. Also pictured are presidential hopefuls Abdullah Abdullah, Abdul Rab Rasul Sayyaf, Hedayat Amin Arsala, and Gul Agha Sherzai. REUTERS/Omar Sobhani

from the Karzai ticket in 2004, Qanooni only secured 16.3 percent of the total vote, carrying seven of Afghanistan's thirty-four provinces. When Abdullah ran against the Karzai-Fahim ticket in 2009, Abdullah carried most of the northern and northeastern provinces considered Jamiat-i Islami strongholds, including Panjshir, Parwan, Badakhshan, Balkh, Kunduz, Baghdis, Samangan, and Takhar. Fahim's support, in other words, was not enough for the Karzai team to collect majority votes in the "home" provinces of the First Vice President and his Jamiat affiliates.

At best, Fahim's backing might have augmented Abdullah's victory in these northern provinces in April. However, with the Tajik vote already likely split between those supporting an Abdullah-Muhammad Khan ticket and those favoring a Zalmay Rasoul-Ahmad Zia Masoud pairing, and with the Uzbek vote up for grabs with the presence of an Ashraf Ghani-Rashid Dostum ticket, Fahim's influence on this front should not be overstated. Abdullah's previous inability to carry the Pashtun-dominated southern and southeastern provinces of the country — provinces whose insecure terrain make them particularly vulnerable to vote fraud — is likely to remain the biggest stumbling block to an Abdullah presidency. On this front, Abdullah's Pashtun First Vice Presidential candidate, a deputy leader of Hezb-i Islami's registered political faction, seems likely to split the vote among Hezb-i Islami sympathizers with presidential candidate Qutbuddin Hilal, the former head of the party's political council. Hilal has reportedly secured the support of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, his father-in-law and leader of Hezb-i Islami's militant wing, who had until recently opposed the holding of Afghan elections in the presence of foreign forces.¹²



Source: National Democratic Institute via afghanistanelectiondata.org

Fahim’s absence will most keenly be felt in the election’s aftermath. A recurring theme of the eulogies commemorating Fahim’s role in the post-Taliban Afghan state was his ability to ensure (or strongarm) national unity. As one Afghan parliamentary deputy chairman declared:

Without any doubt, Marshal Fahim could have been a source of assurance for recognition of election results by all of the political movements. Marshal Qasim Fahim was a person who could prevent disputes or political disturbances after the elections as well as... gain the trust of the influential people in case of disputes arising after the elections.¹³

Here we get to the crux of Fahim’s importance to the upcoming election — his ability to have leveraged his burnished mujahideen credentials, his ethnic leadership, and his firm grip over the country’s security apparatus to help legitimate the eventual winner. Which candidate Fahim would have thrown his support to at the eleventh hour is unclear, but it would almost certainly have been the team that could convincingly assure his own interests. This brokering role would have been far more influential to the eventual outcome of the presidential transition — albeit one that would have cemented his own

authority in the bargain — than any stated preference for a particular candidate. According to diplomatic sources, Mr. Fahim had “privately assured Mr. Karzai that if Mr. Abdullah lost, he would use his influence to keep Tajiks from rejecting the winner and provoking another postelection political crisis at a dangerous time.”¹⁴ One commentator noted during the 2009 election: “Even if the incumbent president does not technically win re-election, Fahim provides Karzai with the armed muscle he would need to challenge the published results.”¹⁵

Fahim’s recent comments to the President echo the sentiments of another northern conciliator, Burhanuddin Rabbani. Rabbani was Jamiat-i Islami’s patriarch, a man who used his influence in the 2004 and 2009 elections to facilitate successive Karzai victories and was assassinated by Taliban insurgents in 2011.¹⁶ Both Fahim and Rabbani were mercurial men and, above all, political survivors. They were capable of flirting with the opposition when it suited them but generally favored continuity in national politics as the best means of securing their interests. Fahim might have reinvented for himself a post-election status similar to the one that Rabbani assumed after the fall of the Taliban: an “elder statesman,” capable of allying with the new order while ensuring his own political survival in the process.¹⁷ The likelihood of a run-off before voting even commences now

increases the odds that any internecine struggle among the leading candidates could drag out for some time.

THE FUTURE OF A FRACTURED NORTHERN ALLIANCE

The death of the powerful leader of Afghanistan's Tajik ethnic minority raises the salient question of how it will impact the nature of northern Afghan politics going forward. Will his demise pave the way for a more pluralistic politics of the north, less dominated by regional warlords and strongmen, or will he simply be replaced?

There is no Tajik northerner at present that can rival Fahim's clout or his grip on the nation's security apparatus. Having served as Ahmad Shah Masoud's head of intelligence, as leader of Masoud's Shura-e Nazar or Supervisory Council of the North, and as defense minister during the Afghan Transitional Administration from 2002-2004, Fahim's military clout placed him *primus inter pares* — so much so that President Karzai bestowed on him the honorific "Field Marshal," the only such title-holder in the country. Fahim's hand-picked successor, General Daud Daud Khan, formerly police commander of the northern zone and a confidante of Ahmad Shah Masoud's, was assassinated by Taliban insurgents in a high-profile attack in May 2011.¹⁸ Bismillah Khan, Fahim's loyal lieutenant, a former Chief of the Army Staff and the current Minister of Defense, is widely believed to lack the political instincts required to step into Fahim's role. Other Jamiat-i Islami politicians that were once close to Ahmad Shah Masoud, including his two younger brothers Ahmad Zia and Ahmad Wali, and Yunus Qanooni, a former Speaker of Parliament, predominantly played political and financial, rather than military, roles during Masoud's resistance against the Soviets.

Atta Noor, the powerful governor of Balkh, might come closest to matching Fahim's martial bona fides. The warlord-turned-governor from Afghanistan's strategically located northern province has long presided as Jamiat's regional leader in the north, having once served as a military commander for the Northern Alliance. A year ago he elicited rumblings that he might consider a presidential bid and he successfully vied to become the Executive Director of Jamiat-i Islami's leadership board.¹⁹ However, Atta's network is largely circumscribed to his native province of Balkh. He decided against a presidential run in 2014. Whether he decides to leave his home province for a role in the national government will be an important indicator of his future intentions.

In the meantime, whichever northerner wins the Afghan election — either as a presidential or vice presidential candidate — could be in a strong position to lay claim to Fahim's legacy.²⁰ The likely contenders are Tajik candidates Abdullah Abdullah and Ahmad Zia Masoud and Uzbek Abdul Rashid Dostum. If Zalmai Rasoul proves victorious his vice presidential candidate

Zia Masoud might use his official position in a manner similar to that of Fahim while in office. While serving as Vice President from 2004-2009 he did not appear inclined in this direction, and he eventually broke with Karzai to form his own opposition National Front party.²¹ This might change with Fahim no longer a rival player and Karzai no longer head of state.

The outcome of the presidential election also does not rule out the possibility of Fahim's brothers eventually transitioning from their role as stewards of the Fahim family's extensive business interests into the political sphere. His eldest son and heir, Adib Fahim, addressed a special memorial ceremony during his father's state burial, in which the latter's body was laid to rest with military honors and a 21-cannon salute.²² Adib, in his late twenties, has expressed interest in participating in Afghan politics. In a June 2013 interview with Renee Montagne of National Public Radio (NPR), he expressed the view:

I cannot foresee the future. However, today, the terms have changed and the younger people, like myself, who are hopeful of becoming players in the future of the country, we do not have to be playing in the same way that the previous generation did.²³

There is hope in the West that the offspring of these Afghan warlords represent a generational gulf from their fathers, reared to participate in politics but educated at liberal, Western institutions abroad. Their experience of the bloody Soviet occupation and civil wars has typically been marginal.²⁴ However, the patronage networks that their fathers built and upon which their authority depends will make radical reform of the way the political game is played difficult. Sons of powerful Afghan patriarchs who cannot command the same loyalties as their fathers can be sidelined or overruled by more influential factions. The politically anodyne figure of Salahuddin Rabbani, Burhanuddin's son, is an example. Rabbani isn't believed to wield much power within Jamiat-i Islami circles despite his symbolic appointment by President Karzai as head of his High Peace Council — a position his father once occupied.²⁵

Whether Adib is willing or capable enough to fill his father's shoes does not obscure an important point about the gradually shifting political landscape in Afghanistan. An entire generation of northern leaders who staked their political futures on their role in the mujahideen resistance movements of the 1980s and 1990s are aging and, in some cases, beginning to die out. Abdul Rasoul Sayyaf and Abdul Rashid Dostum are in their sixties. Even the so-called "Young Turks" — the next generation of northern leaders below them — are in their fifties. Until now, President Karzai has been able to successfully co-opt powerful elements of the former Northern Alliance in order to secure enough northern support for his administration in Afghanistan's multi-ethnic state. Any further fracturing of that Alliance might mean that future presidents face a more complex and potentially more inhospitable political terrain in their attempts at co-opting different constituencies. If so, the

future of Afghan politics could more closely resemble Marshal Fahim's favorite pastime of *buzkashi* — a violent and popular Afghan sport in which horse riders compete over a headless goat and only the most masterful players ever get close to the carcass.²⁶

Post-script as of March 20, 2014

The question of what shape the political landscape in Kabul would take after the passing of First Vice President Marshal Mohammad Qasim Fahim was answered in part on Tuesday. President Hamid Karzai decided to nominate Mohammad Yunus Qanooni to fill Fahim's position. President Karzai made the decision at a meeting at the Presidential Palace with Jamiati-Islami Party leaders and Marshal Fahim's family members.²⁷ This came a day after Jamiat member Abdul Hafiz Mansour said that the party had recommended to the President that he appoint Qanooni to the role. According to Mansour, Jamiat had held meetings to decide between a number of candidates, but Qanooni enjoyed support from a "majority inside Marshal Fahim's family...as well as the president."²⁸ Qanooni, a Panjshiri Tajik and a close associate of Marshal Fahim and presidential candidate Abdullah Abdullah, has served as interior minister, education minister, and speaker of the Wolesi Jirga. After the fall of the Taliban, Fahim, Qanooni, and Abdullah were more amenable to collaborating with a broader coalition than the preceding generation of Jamiat leaders.²⁹ Karzai recognized the value in working with these new Panjshiri Jamiat leaders, including Qanooni, and has subsequently sought to co-opt them into government when beneficial.³⁰ For his part, though Qanooni ran unsuccessfully in the 2004 election against Karzai, he has engaged in deals with the president that lend support to the government while still advancing Jamiat's agenda.³¹ The new vice president may change how deals are made in the wake of the elections in ways that do not favor Abdullah Abdullah. According to an informal canvassing of Wolesi Jirga members last month, Qanooni was listed as one of 39 parliamentary representatives and senators supporting Abdullah.³² However, despite their history of mutual support, Qanooni has refrained from publicly endorsing Abdullah. Karzai's appointment of Qanooni could be a play to co-opt those in Abdullah's camp and therefore can be seen as an attempt to extend his strategy of co-option of Tajik leaders not just through the remainder of his presidency, but beyond.

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NOTES

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