

ABDUL WARDAK AND BISMILLAH KHAN MOHAMMADI: UNPACKING AFGHANISTAN'S MINISTERIAL SHAKE-UP

In an unprecedented single session of Parliament on August 4th, the Lower House dismissed the Afghan defense and interior ministers, Abdul Rahim Wardak and Bismillah Khan Mohammadi, following successive no-confidence votes. After weeks of alleged rocket attacks by Pakistani security forces in the border provinces, Parliament summoned the two ministers to appear before the assembly and submit to questioning over rising insecurity in the country. The heated session that resulted in their impeachment spanned the members' concerns over rocket attacks from across the Durand Line, allegations of corruption and nepotism within the Defense and Interior Ministries, and targeted assassinations of high-profile figures across the country.

The Presidential Palace was quick to announce in the wake of Parliament's decision that the two ministers would be asked to remain in an acting capacity until their successor(s) are named; former Defense Minister Wardak nonetheless immediately resigned following his ouster. With transition underway, the dismissal of two such vital Cabinet posts has left the international community anxiously speculating the move's impact on stability and governance in the country. The precise motivation behind Parliament's action remains unclear. However, at least three distinct constituencies potentially benefit from the shake-up: President Karzai and his close allies, the Pakistani government, and Parliament.

PRESIDENT KARZAI: THE VIEW FROM THE PRESIDENTIAL PALACE

In the past, President Karzai flouted similar dismissals by contesting the validity of the parliamentary decision and by retaining dismissed ministers indefinitely in an acting capacity. That the Presidential Palace was quick to acknowledge Parliament's constitutional authority to take such action is not necessarily conclusive evidence of a shift in behavior. The President chose to keep both ministers in their posts rather than naming their respective deputies as acting ministers, the sudden resignation of his defense minister notwithstanding.¹ However, with anti-corruption and reform high on the agenda for both the Administration and Parliament as the election season gears up, the President is likely to be under even greater scrutiny to uphold the rule of law.²

More importantly, the reshuffle could provide the President with an opportunity to recalibrate two crucial posts prior to the formation of a new government. Karzai will once

again be able to curry favor with key allies across all major ethnic camps and thereby encourage their dependence on him. Rumors of behind-the-scenes Palace lobbying for the impeachments were making the rounds even before the parliamentary session began.³ The characteristics that made both ministers such valuable allies for the President—their clout, popularity with Western interlocutors, and, in Mohammadi's case, associations with a crucial northern Tajik constituency—may have been liabilities for him in a very uncertain election season. At the very least, Karzai can use the two vacancies to recalibrate his political deal-making as he deems necessary ahead of the upcoming election.

As Karzai positions his government to adjust to a significantly diminished foreign security presence, he may turn to Pakistan for assistance in the volatile border region. Both ministers are known for their strong anti-Pakistan and anti-reconciliation views, thus potentially making any such transition more difficult.⁴ The episode resonates with the President's dismissal of Minister of Interior Hanif Atmar and former National Directorate of Security Chief Amrullah Saleh, who were asked to resign under a similar cloud of suspicion after the attack on the 2010 Peace Council.⁵ As cross-border accusations between the Afghan and Pakistan governments have grown shrill on both sides, the President has kept a relatively low public profile. In their defense before the Parliament, both Wardak and Mohammadi claimed that they had not been given the authority to launch retaliatory attacks, but would have been ready to implement any orders from the President had they arrived. Although Parliament summoned other Cabinet Ministers to the Assembly for questioning, no other officials were submitted to a confidence vote at that time.⁶

PAKISTAN: THE VIEW FROM THE BORDER REGIONS

Although the ministers were ostensibly dismissed by Parliament for failing to secure the border from perceived Pakistani attacks, the potential influence of the Pakistanis themselves in the outcome must be taken into consideration. While Pakistan's history of seeking 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan by influencing its domestic affairs is a long and tumultuous one, the planned withdrawal of NATO forces has almost certainly elevated Pakistan's willingness to seek additional influence. Pakistani officials have grown more vocal about linking both Baloch insurgent groups and the Pakistani Taliban with Afghan sponsorship. Senior Pakistani officials are vehement that the Pakistani Taliban loyal to Maulana Fazlullah are using havens in Afghanistan to resume attacks in north-western Pakistan. Afghanistan, meanwhile, has complained about cross-border artillery shells and rockets specific to those owned and operated by the ISI being fired from Pakistan into Afghanistan's Kunar province. The barrage of rocket attacks from Pakistan that were the primary cause of the ministers' dismissal may also serve as a reminder to Karzai that he presides over a fundamentally weak state and that a deal worked out by both sides to maintain security would be in his best interest. The removal of one or both ministers suspicious of Pakistani involvement could thus prove to be beneficial for any pending negotiation between both sides. Reports have circulated that President Hamid Karzai recently agreed to persuade NATO to conduct action against Pakistani Taliban taking sanctuary in Nuristan and Kunar provinces, provided Pakistan can deliver the Haqqani Network leadership to the negotiating table.⁷ Although the latter is highly unlikely, the former is certainly a possibility.

PARLIAMENT: THE VIEW FROM THE WOLESI JIRGA

The episode has clearly indicated that Parliament desires to flex its muscles. What remains uncertain is whether the prospect of greater legislative solidarity is the principal driver behind these impeachments. Although an inability to prevent cross-border rocket attacks formed the public basis of parliamentary dissatisfaction, other, less public, grievances voiced by Parliament during the session included unfair patronage to members of the same ethnic group in the distribution of ministry appointments.⁸ MPs frustrated in their attempts to receive greater patronage from one or both ministries would have possessed personal reasons for wanting the ministers dismissed. If Karzai loyalists in Parliament were indeed supportive of the move, the opening up of two plumb Cabinet positions may have provided sufficient reason. Slotting key individuals within Parliament into either post could allow Karzai to build his support among certain core

constituencies, including southern and eastern Pashtuns. As he deliberates over his future selections, the President will need to weigh the benefits of choosing candidates for political reasons against a possible jeopardizing of security gains and the smooth handover of forces.

CONCLUSION

Less than two weeks after their dismissal, the potential reasons for, and forces behind, the move are still unclear. Certainly, there are numerous actors that potentially stand to gain from the reshuffle, to include the President, Parliament and the Pakistanis. As the situation continues to unfold, some areas for further investigation include: 1) Whether the episode reflects a fundamental rebalancing of the influence and authority of the legislature against that of the executive branch; 2) What effect, if any, the shake-up may have upon the US and NATO transition; 3) What the future replacements in both Ministries could indicate about a possible rebalancing of ethnic divisions within the military; and 4) What Tajik powerbroker and First Vice President Fahim Khan may do as a result of Mohammadi's dismissal, given their close historical and personal relationship.

Mara Tchalakov is a doctoral candidate in International Relations at the University of Oxford. She recently joined ISW as a Research Analyst.

NOTES

¹ 'Unseated Ministers to Continue Work Until Replacement' Bakhtar News, 6 August 2012. <http://www.bakhtarnews.com.af/eng/security/item/3480-unseated-ministers-to-continue-work-until-replacement.html>

² 'Wolesi Jirga to monitor use of aid' Pajhwok Afghan News, 11 August 2012. <http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2012/08/11/wolesi-jirga-monitor-use-aid-ibrahimi>.

³ Foschini, Fabrizio, 'Parliament sacks key ministers: Two birds with one stone?' Afghan Analysts Network, 6 August 2012. <http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/index.asp?id=2908>

⁴ 'Afghan Defense Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak Resigns' Khaama Press, 7 August 2012. <http://www.khaama.com/afghan-defense-minister-abdul-rahim-wardak-resigns-690/>

⁵ 'Afghan Leader Forces Out Top 2 Security Officials' *New York Times*, 6 June 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/07/world/asia/07afghan.html>

⁶ 'Ministers' Dismissal Evokes Mixed Response' Pajhwok Afghan News, 5 August 2012. <http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2012/08/05/ministers-dismissal-evokes-mixed-response>.

⁷ 'Afghan Ministers Lose Jobs Over Unchecked Border Shelling', *The Express Tribune*, 5 August 2012. <http://tribune.com.pk/story/417796/afghan-ministers-lose-jobs-over-unchecked-border-shelling/>

⁸ 'Afghanistan: Karzai Acknowledges Wolesi Jirga's Authority to Dismiss Ministers' Pajhwok Afghan News, 4 August 2012.