

UNPACKING AFGHANISTAN'S MINISTERIAL SHAKE-UP: KARZAI'S NEXT MOVE

On August 4th the Lower House of the Afghan Parliament dismissed the Afghan Defense and Interior ministers, Abdul Rahim Wardak and Bismillah Khan Mohammadi, following successive no-confidence votes in the prosecution of their duties. In a decree issued last week, President Karzai formalized his nominees for the positions of Defense and Interior minister as well as replaced his national intelligence chief, Rahmatullah Nabil. The President nominated Ghulam Mujtaba Patang, the Deputy Interior minister, to the post of Interior minister. He chose a close Karzai affiliate, Asadullah Khalid, the current Minister of Tribal and Border Affairs, to replace the National Directorate of Security (NDS) chief. In a controversial and blatantly political move, Karzai selected the ousted Mohammadi to replace General Wardak as Minister of Defense.

It remains uncertain whether all of his nominees will be formally confirmed by the legislature in the coming days. However, Parliamentary lawmakers and political pundits have speculated that the reshuffle represents a political compromise designed to consolidate the President's power ahead of the upcoming elections, to maintain factional support from key Tajik powerbrokers, and to keep control over the security apparatus of the state.¹

A closer examination of each of Karzai's nominees illustrates the President's overall calculus to set conditions for the distribution of power post-2014, particularly among the three crucial security ministries. Mohammadi's appointment as Minister of Defense reveals the alliance between Karzai and First Vice President Marshall Fahim, reinvigorated in 2009, is alive and well. Fahim is Mohammadi's principal patron and if installed, Mohammadi would maintain Tajik control over the Afghan National Army and Air Force. His appointment would also serve to keep Karzai's political opposition fragmented ahead of the elections by co-opting pivotal Jamiat members. Karzai is well aware that the empowerment of Fahim's network alienates other Tajiks, and this recognition formed the basis for his renewal of the alliance ahead of the last presidential election. Karzai's elevation of Patang and Khalid may help to counterbalance the influence the President has extended to Fahim via Mohammadi, while further

entrenching his own personal influence within the intelligence ministry in the latter case. With the exodus of foreign troops scheduled for 2014, control of the NDS through a powerful political proxy such as Khalid may facilitate a kind of 'soft power' strategy to contend with the influence of the Taliban and other opposition groups over the long-term. Such a strategy would mitigate the risk inherent to Karzai in relinquishing the armed forces to Jamiat.

THE MINISTRY OF DEFENSE: PRESERVING THE KARZAI-FAHIM ALLIANCE

In addition to prioritizing a semblance of continuity amidst the ongoing transition of national security responsibility, the nomination of Mohammadi indicates that the Karzai-Fahim alliance remains a key component of Karzai's political agenda.² Karzai's nomination of Mohammadi to replace Abdul Rahim Wardak as Minister of Defense was an overtly political maneuver, coming as it did on the heels of Parliament's outright dismissal of the former Minister of Interior for alleged corruption and ineptitude. Although it was Parliament that ousted Mohammadi, the lateral movement of the former Minister of Interior over to the position of Minister of Defense was very likely calculated by Karzai in advance of the Parliamentary vote. Specifically, the nomination hints that First Vice President Marshall Fahim, himself

a former Minister of Defense, arranged a deal with President Karzai to re-establish a loyal Tajik in control of the Defense ministry. Fahim's domination of the key security ministries dates back to the early days of the post-Taliban Afghan government; maintaining control over the Afghan army has long been prioritized as vital to the preservation of Tajik influence. In exchange for the concession of such control, Karzai has relied upon Fahim's support to fracture the northern Tajik leadership, neutralize his political opposition, and stave off the possibility of a coup that would almost certainly rupture the country along ethnic lines.³

One of the Karzai Administration's greatest political accomplishments after 2008 was its co-option of powerful factions of the Jamiat party that had formed the core of the President's political opposition. Fahim's allies commanded the loyalties of the most cohesive segments of the Afghan security forces and, although 2004-2008 saw a large increase in Pashtun officers as a result of government-mandated quotas to restore the ethnic balance, Tajiks remained overrepresented in both the Defense and Interior ministries.⁴ When he was Chief of Staff of the Army, and then the most senior Panjshiri in the Afghan National Army (ANA), Mohammadi's personal patronage network was the largest within the Afghan National Army (ANA); he frequently appointed loyal deputies and undermined those opposed to him. According to an unofficial survey carried out in 2008 in cooperation with ANA generals, Defense Minister Wardak could count on the personal loyalty of only one out of eleven brigade commanders, while Mohammadi commanded the loyalty of at least six of eleven.⁵

The appointment would place Mohammadi in a principal role to coordinate with ISAF to accomplish the 2014 transition plan, to consolidate his influence, and to direct the use of force. Although the presence of Chief of the Army Staff General Sher Karimi, a Pashtun from Khost province, might temper Mohammadi's influence, it is almost certain that Mohammadi would follow the pattern he pursued as both Chief of Army Staff and as Minister of Interior – namely, packing the upper and middle ranks with loyal supporters.

And yet, bequeathing the Ministry of Defense to Mohammadi may be a way to secure critical Tajik support for the current political constellation ahead of the elections, keep any new opposition factions balkanized, and militate against the possibility of a Jamiat-led coup. By guaranteeing certain powerful Tajik segments a role in securing the state, Karzai almost certainly recognizes that both his own personal political viability and that of the fragile unity of the country is at stake.⁶

THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR: PREPARING FOR A PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

The ministry with possibly the greatest long-term potential to affect both internal and border security in the country is that of the Interior, which neither faction appears to be prioritizing in the spate of recent nominations. Karzai's appointment of Ghulam Mujtaba Patang, a relatively unknown deputy minister of Interior and a Pashtun from Logar province, to fill a sought-after Cabinet post has engendered speculation over the President's underlying motivation for such a move. Patang is one of the few professional police officers to rise to the rank of a deputy minister, and this reputation for professionalism serves potentially several purposes for the President. The nomination is a comparatively safe one, likely to secure the support of the legislature and a nod to the calls of both Parliament and the West to reform and institutionalize the security ministries. Patang currently oversees the Afghan Public Protection Force, a government agency mandated by Presidential decree to assume the security role previously provided by many private security firms. Unlike his predecessor, Patang does not possess a strong ethnic or political power base of his own; this makes him potentially much easier for Karzai to control, and at the same time much more vulnerable to the coercive influence of other powerbrokers, including those loyal remnants of Mohammadi's network in the Ministry.⁷ Although Patang may initiate a more meritocratic shift in the selection of individuals to fill ministry appointments, the most compelling reason for Karzai's innocuous selection may have more to do with the upcoming Presidential election. After the charges of corruption and vote-rigging leveled against the President

during the last election, Karzai may want to take extra precaution that his successor appears to win a 'free and fair' contest with the Ministry's assistance.

THE NATIONAL DIRECTORATE OF SECURITY: POSITIONING A POTENTIAL PROXY

The nomination of Asadullah Khalid, a powerful Karzai confidante and a former governor of both Kandahar and Ghazni provinces, to head the nation's intelligence agency embodies the delicate balancing act Karzai must achieve both to secure the support of the Fahim alliance and promote his own interests. From an ethnic perspective, positioning Khalid in the NDS is a potentially strong countermove to his bequeathing the Ministry of Defense to Mohammadi and, by extension, Fahim. The previous intelligence chief, Rahmatullah Nabil, an ethnic Pashtun who oversaw the President's special guards unit for many years, was considered a competent administrator who nevertheless possessed very little ethnic or power base of his own. Khalid, by contrast, has already proven to be a very influential political proxy for the President in the southern swathe of the country where he took over security in the wake of Ahmad Wali Karzai's assassination.⁸ The outgoing Minister of Border and Tribal affairs is known to be an implacable foe of the Taliban who possesses an extensive network of informants and even maintains ties to certain former Northern Alliance commanders with whom he served against the Taliban.⁹ The recent spate of insider attacks on coalition forces within the Afghan armed forces and Khalid's promotion of a series of uprisings against the Taliban in various parts of the country, specifically in Ghazni, may additionally recommend him for the post.¹⁰ Transitioning Khalid to the NDS would allow him to continue to monitor and facilitate similar such developments across the country and simultaneously ensure Khalid's loyalties continue to lie with, and depend upon, the Karzai family network.

From an institutional perspective, control of the NDS through a powerful political proxy such as Khalid may facilitate a kind of 'soft power' strategy to contend long-term with the influence of the Taliban and other insurgent and political opposition groups. Although

Khalid has been accused of employing covert torture tactics against his enemies while serving in his previous capacities, the crucial distinction is that such a strategy would be inherently less reliant on the overt employment of Tajik-dominated armed forces. Moreover, placing an influential confidante such as Khalid in a security ministry that directly oversees some aspect of the country's 'hard power'—the Afghan army or the police—would have likely been considered unacceptable by certain key members of Jamiat.

CONCLUSION

Karzai's nominations demonstrate the careful equilibration demanded on the part of the President if he is to consolidate his influence ahead of upcoming elections, offset potential opposition to that consolidation, and orchestrate an ethnic balance among security authorities. If Mohammadi is installed as the next Minister of Defense, either with or without formal Parliamentary approval, the move may be considered a win-win for Karzai and Fahim by temporarily preserving an alliance that serves the specific interests of both. Of the three nominations, it is also the one most likely to directly affect ISAF operations. However, the appointment of Asadullah Khalid to the NDS hints that Karzai's primary effort to affect the long-term security of the state may ultimately prove to be through soft, rather than hard, power. Ironically, the ministry with the greatest long-term potential to affect both local and border security in the country is that of the Interior, which neither faction appears to be prioritizing in the spate of recent nominations. In the end, Karzai's appointment of a relatively unknown professional police officer may be most closely tied to ensuring a smooth electoral transition.

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NOTES

¹ 'Afghan MPs slam president's selection of ministers' *Afghan Islamic Press*, 4 September 2012.

² 'Afghanistan: Karzai to replace key ministers' *Daily Star Online*, 29 August 2012.

³ Giustozzi, Antonio. *Empires of Mud: Wars and Warlords in Afghanistan*. London: Hurst and Company, 2009.

⁴ Forsberg, Carl. *The Karzai-Fahim Alliance*. Institute for the Study of War, April 2012.

⁵ Giustozzi, Antonio. 'The Afghan National Army: Unwarranted Hope?' *The RUSI Journal*, Vol. 154, No. 6, December 2009.

⁶ Fillkins, Dexter. 'After America: Will civil war hit Afghanistan when the US leaves?' *The New Yorker*, 9 July 2012.

⁷ Opiel, Richard A. and Graham Bowley. 'Karzai is said to consider divisive figures for top cabinet posts' *The New York Times*, 29 August 2012.

⁸ Opiel Jr., Richard. 'Western and Afghan officials split over Karzai nomination for spy chief' *New York Times*, 12 September 2012.

⁹ Ariosto, David. 'Karzai's choice for Afghan intelligence chief suspected of torture, trafficking' *CNN*, 5 September 2012.

¹⁰ Rubin, Alissa J. and Matthew Rosenberg. 'Ragtag revolts in parts of Afghanistan repel Taliban influence' *New York Times*, 25 August 2012.