

Strategic Insight

The Loya Jirga, Ethnic Rivalries and Future Afghan Stability

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On June 24 the Afghan transitional government and administration of Hamid Karzai was installed during formal ceremonies in Kabul. Karzai had easily won the June 13 election at a national political assembly, or loya jirga. The loya jirga consisted of 1500 representatives, elected or appointed from 32 provinces, and debated the political future of Afghanistan over a seven-day period.

The Karzai government is supposed to rule Afghanistan through 2003. During the ceremony, Karzai and his new cabinet took an oath in both major Afghan languages (Pashtu and Dari), vowing to "follow the basic teachings of Islam" and the laws of the land, to renounce corruption, and to "safeguard the honor and integrity of Afghanistan."^[1] How successful they are in achieving these vows will be critical to the near term future of Afghanistan, its reconstruction, and possibly the stability of the entire region of Central Asia.

This transitional government was the result of an Emergency Loya Jirga and part of the Bonn Agreement (of November-December 2001). While not explicitly stating so in the Bonn Agreement, Lakhdar Brahimi, the Special Representative of the U.N. Secretary General suggested that the role of the Emergency Loya Jirga after six months was to remedy some of the defects of the interim government originally chosen at Bonn. One such defect was that the original interim government did not closely reflect the demographics of the country.

Bonn Meeting

The Bonn meeting was an internationally brokered conference, heavily influenced by the United States, that brought together four of the major Afghan factions -- the Northern Alliance (primarily Tajik), the Rome group loyal to former king Zahir Shah, and the smaller Cyprus Group (Iran-backed) and Peshawar Front (Pakistan-based and primarily Pashtun) exile groups.^[2] After nine days of intensive negotiations and deal making, the Afghan groups signed an agreement aimed at establishing a transitional government for Afghanistan.

Pashtun tribal leader Karzai was chosen to serve as head of an interim power-sharing council, which took office in Kabul on December 22. Karzai was clearly the U.S. favorite for this position. Especially after the Taliban's assassination of Abdul Haq last fall, Karzai was the one Pashtun leader with whom the United States felt comfortable. Washington lobbied vigorously in Bonn to secure Karzai's position as the leader of the Afghan transitional government.^[3]

While some radical Arabs view Karzai as a U.S. puppet, the Afghan leader has been willing to criticize U.S. actions that he has not viewed favorably. Karzai's relative independence from the United States has been seen recently in his critical statements concerning the deadly U.S. air strikes on several Pashtun villages in Uruzgan.

The results of the Bonn Conference saw the Northern Alliance, which has controlled Kabul since the defeat of the Taliban, receiving the three most powerful ministries. Younis Qanooni, who led the Northern Alliance's delegation, was made interior minister, while alliance commander-in-chief General Mohammad Fahim got the Defense Ministry and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah retained his position as foreign secretary. The 30-member cabinet included 11 Pashtuns, eight Tajiks, five from the Shi'a Hazara population, and three Uzbeks, with the rest drawn from other minorities.

Northern Alliance cabinet members appointed by the Bonn Meeting were primarily ethnic Tajiks and former militia leaders from the Panjshir Valley -- base of the famed Afghan resistant leader Ahmed Shah Massoud who was assassinated on September 9, 2001. Since the defeat of the Taliban these Panjshiris have dominated the Afghan security forces.

One could rightfully argue that neither the Bonn meeting nor the government it chose was very representative of the demographics and traditional power centers in Afghanistan. In particular, relatively few Pashtuns were given seats of power. [4] Pashtuns expected this imbalance to be corrected in the Emergency Loya Jirga, with Karzai shifting the balance of power back their way and giving the former king a prominent national role. This did not happen.

Emergency Loya Jirga and Resulting Transitional Government

The Bonn agreement called on a Transitional Authority, including a broad-based transitional administration, "to lead Afghanistan until such time as a fully representative government can be elected", no later than two years from the convening of the Emergency Loya Jirga. The Emergency Loya Jirga was also to elect a Head of State for the transitional administration. [5]

The main issues concerning government composition of the Emergency Loya Jirga turned out to be the role of the former king -- Zahir Shah -- and his representatives as well as the role of the Panjshiris who since the defeat of the Taliban have controlled most of the Afghan security services in and near Kabul. Both of these issues were resolved in rather interesting ways.

Once the former king gave his support for the election of fellow Pashtun Karzai as the Afghan head of state, ethnic issues seemed somewhat diffused as subjects such as religion, the role of parliament, stability, and economic development dominated the jirga debates. This diffusion of ethnic suspicions and rivalry, however, was short lived.

The Makeup of Afghanistan's New Government and Cabinet

<i>President</i>	Hamid Karzai	Pashtun
<i>Deputy Presidents</i>	Mohammed Fahim	Tajik
	Karim Khalili	Hazara
	Abdul Qadir	Pashtun
<i>Special Advisor on Security</i>	Yunus Qanooni	Tajik
Cabinet Position		
<i>Defense Minister</i>	Mohammed Fahim	Tajik
<i>Foreign Minister</i>	Abdullah	Tajik
<i>Finance Minister</i>	Ashraf Ghani	Pashtun
<i>Interior Minister</i>	Taj Mohammed Wardak	Pashtun
<i>Planning Minister</i>	Mohammed Mohaqik	Hazara
<i>Communications Minister</i>	Masoom Stanakzai	Pashtun
<i>Borders Minister</i>	Arif Nurzai	Pashtun*
<i>Refugees Minister</i>	Intayatullah Nazeri	Tajik

<i>Mines Minister</i>	Juma M. Mohammadi	Pashtun
<i>Light Industries Minister</i>	Mohammed Alim Razm	Uzbek
<i>Public Health Minister</i>	Dr. Sohaila Siddiqi	Pashtun
<i>Commerce Minister</i>	Sayed Mustafa Kasemi	Shiite Muslim
<i>Agriculture Minister</i>	Sayed Hussain Anwari	Hazara
<i>Justice Minister</i>	Abbas Karimi	Uzbek
<i>Information and Culture Minister</i>	Saeed Makhdoom Rahim	Tajik
<i>Reconstruction Minister</i>	Mohammed Fahim Farhang	Pashtun
<i>Haj and Mosques Minister</i>	Mohammed Amin Naziryar	Pashtun
<i>Urban Affairs Minister</i>	Yusuf Pashtun	Pashtun
<i>Public Works Minister</i>	Abdul Qadir	Pashtun
<i>Social Affairs Minister</i>	Noor Mohammed Karkin	Turkman
<i>Water and Power Minister</i>	Ahmed Shakar Karkar	Uzbek
<i>Irrigation & Environment Minister</i>	Ahmed Yusuf Nuristani	Pashtun
<i>Martyrs and Disabled Minister</i>	Abdullah Wardak	Pashtun
<i>Higher Education Minister</i>	Sharif Faez	Tajik
<i>Civil Aviation & Tourism Minister</i>	Mir Wais Saddiq	Tajik
<i>Transportation Minister</i>	Saeed Mohammed Ali Jawad	Shiite
<i>Education Minister</i>	Yunus Qanooni	Tajik
<i>Rural Development Minister</i>	Hanif Asmar	Pashtun

Courts

Supreme Court Chief Justice Sheikh Hadi Shinwari

* but from a Tajik-dominated party

Source: The Associated Press, 22 June 2002

The most problematic and sensitive appointments were in the area of security. Karzai renamed Mohammed Fahim, a leader of the Northern Alliance forces based in the Panjshir Valley, as defense minister.^[6] He also appointed Fahim as one of three vice-presidents, strengthening his position. This move was a clear indication of the power of the Tajiks as well as the Northern Alliance and signaled Karzai's acceptance of the Panjshiris as necessary partners in his militarily weak government. Karzai discovered he could not keep stability in a fragile situation without the help of powerful factional leaders such as Fahim. However, this relationship between Karzai and Fahim is quickly becoming contentious and has the potential to bring down the Transitional Government.

For all practical purposes there was only one key change in the cabinet resulting from the loya jirga -- the departure of interior minister Yunus Qanooni, a Tajik. Qanooni played a key role during the Bonn Meeting in initially securing support for Karzai's candidacy among leaders of a powerful, Tajik-led political and military coalition.

The dismissal of Qanooni was met with considerable controversy. When Karzai announced he would replace Qanooni at the powerful interior ministry with Taj Mohammed Wardak, an elderly governor and ethnic Pushtun, Panjshiri soldiers and policemen in the ministry initially resisted the change with roadblocks and work stoppages. Karzai, recognizing the implications of alienating the Tajiks as well as the reality of the considerable military strength of the Northern Alliance and especially the Panjshiris,

eventually resolved the "crisis" by appointing Qanooni as adviser for internal security, a newly created post, as well as minister of education.[\[7\]](#)

Fahim, Qanooni and Ahmad Wali Massoud are all vying for the leadership of the Panjshiris (Shura-i Nazar), and relations among them reportedly are not good. The demands by Pashtuns that their power should be reduced exacerbated relations in particular between Fahim and Qanooni. Karzai has been caught in the middle of this. The basic reality is that, were it not for the U.S. and coalition presence, the Panjshiris could replace Karzai anytime they wanted, and a lot of them are chafing under the constraints of a coalition. If push comes to shove, we could witness an expansion of ethnically based Afghan conflicts.

Karzai's choice of cabinet members also clearly represents a compromise between stability and change. Many Pashtuns expected that he would make major changes to the cabinet chosen during the Bonn Meeting by removing factional leaders and appointing a balanced and professional cabinet more in line with the desires of the Pashtun community. Ultimately, this proved to be an impossible task because the leaders of the Northern Alliance were less than accommodating to change that would diffuse the considerable power they received from the Bonn Meeting. The current cabinet reflects Karzai's recognition of the importance of striking a balance between the Pashtuns and Tajiks. Karzai is intimately aware of this after leading Afghanistan's interim government for six months in an uneasy partnership with leaders from the Tajik-led Northern Alliance. He has been faced with an extremely difficult task of assembling an administration that would satisfy all major ethnic groups while meeting the country's desperate need for professional governance after years of ruinous conflict.

The composition of the cabinet also suggests that the Pashtuns remain disorganized and lacking leadership acceptable to broader groups. Considering that Kabul has traditionally been ruled by Pashtuns, we are witnessing a shift in traditional power relationships very different from what we have witnessed in the past. But then again, alliances and ideologies are impermanent, which is one reason Afghanistan has had nothing resembling a stable central government for much of its existence. Nevertheless, the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance has recognized their ability to achieve practical superiority against the Pashtuns who are superior in numbers and who had held them at bay for years.

Ultimately the key issue is, how will this government govern? What will it do? If the government delivers, it is hoped that people will not worry as much about the ethnic identity of the ministers. If the government fails to fulfill the wishes of the people, then the assertions of ethnic identity have a greater potential to create conflict.

In the end it appears that the loya jirga's main achievement was to give legitimacy to Hamid Karzai's transitional government -- an end-state seemingly consistent with the desires of the United States and other international actors. Stability in Afghanistan is going to be a difficult goal to accomplish, especially with the continued ethnic rivalries that are clearly reflected in the Afghan Transitional Government and Cabinet.

Alienated Pashtuns?

This new power of the Tajiks has not sat well with the Pashtuns and has alienated many in Karzai's critical Pashtun power base. While former King Zahir Shah was named by Karzai as "Father of the Nation," many Pashtuns were dismayed and angered that none of his aides had been given senior posts.[\[8\]](#) Other than Karzai, very few Pashtuns hold positions of power in the Afghan cabinet. In July, a *Washington Post* article titled "Pashtuns Losing Faith in Karzai, U.S."[\[9\]](#) suggested that the Pashtuns are "becoming rapidly disillusioned by a series of developments that have reinforced the power of rival ethnic Tajiks and militia leaders, left the former king politically sidelined and a Pashtun vice president assassinated, and subjected Pashtun villages to lethal U.S. air attacks."[\[10\]](#)

Pashtuns reportedly do not feel welcomed in Kabul where the officials that they see do not speak Pashtu. Padsha Khan Zadran, a powerful Pashtun leader/warlord in the important Khost Province[\[11\]](#) sums up the

sentiments of many Pashtuns when he asks, "Why are they humiliating Pashtuns? We're the majority. They placed Hamid Karzai at the top as a representative of Pashtuns. But in reality he's no longer a Pashtun. He's sold himself out. He's a traitor. Pashtuns cannot sit around waiting. They will react and will claim their rights."[\[12\]](#)

Zadran has already mobilized his supporters against the Karzai government. His supporters have demonstrated in Khost calling for Karzai's resignation as well as blocking the roads leading from Khost to Kabul. Zadran also wants his local power recognized by an official position in the Afghan Government. In response to such actions, it is reported that Karzai is considering the use of military action against Zadran. Last Sunday, Karzai issued a statement calling Zadran and his group of supporters a "group of bandits." Karzai further warned that the military may be "forced to take any actions deemed necessary to keep peace and stability."[\[13\]](#)

If Karzai does take military action against Zadran it could precipitate a larger crisis for his administration. It would signal a military action against a fellow Pashtun and would be Karzai's first attempt to explicitly exert the government's influence and control outside of Kabul. This could have disastrous consequences for Karzai if other warlords who are in firm control view such actions as a threat against their own respective regions. The warlords might explicitly rise up against his regime.

It must be remembered that the central governments have traditionally been weak and have had little real control in the hinterland of Afghanistan. The characterization of Afghanistan by the 19th century British diplomat Sir Henry Rawlinson -- as "*consist[ing] of a mere collection of tribes, of unequal power and divergent habits, which are held together more or less closely, according to the personal character of the chief who rules them. The feeling of patriotism, as it is known in Europe, cannot exist among Afghans, for there is no common country*" -- is still true today and suggests critical challenges for any central government in Kabul.

Continued Pashtun and Tajik Rivalry

It appears that the distrust between the Pashtuns and Tajiks will continue to dominate the politics of Afghanistan and in so doing make the achievement of a positive peace and reconstruction in Afghanistan much more difficult. Indeed the question of the Karzai government either succeeding or succumbing will be in large part a function of this long-standing ethnic rivalry. This has been clearly witnessed in the last few weeks as Karzai has taken several unexpected steps to challenge the rule over the military by Fahim and his fellow Panjshiris. An indignant Fahim has met Karzai's insistence that Fahim reduce the numbers and influence of the Panjshiris in the Defense Ministry and replace them with non-Tajiks.[\[14\]](#)

Observers suggest that Karzai's recent replacement of his Defense Ministry Guards with U.S. Special Forces is a clear sign that Karzai doubts the loyalty of Fahim and his fellow Tajiks. The *Washington Post* reports that "officials close to [Karzai] say they fear that the growing tension [between Fahim and Karzai] could lead to violent reprisals against the president, whose political base remains weak and whose authority barely extends beyond Kabul."[\[15\]](#) The *Post* quotes an Afghan deputy minister who is close to Karzai as stating, "For six months Fahim dictated to Karzai, and he was the most powerful man in Afghanistan. Now he is worried that may change. The President has gotten [foreign] protection now, but I still think he is in danger. Fahim and his friends are warlords, and you cannot make peace out of them. If the situation remains as it is, I think we are headed back to civil war."[\[16\]](#)

A renewed civil war would be absolutely disastrous for Afghanistan where there has been constant violent civil strife for the last 25 years. Yet the signs seem to be pointing in this direction. Fahim and his fellow Tajik Panjshiris believe that their five-year struggle with the Taliban has secured their right to rule Afghanistan. After all, it was their Northern Alliance who drove the Taliban from Kabul -- of course with a tremendous U.S. air campaign. They will not play a secondary role to the Pashtuns or anybody else.

If the Panjshiris do replace Karzai with one of their Tajik own, it will only be the third time in Afghan history that a Pashtun was not at the head of the national government in Kabul.^[17] If such an event occurs the chances of a civil war will be nearly certain, even considering the relative lack of Pashtun unity we are presently witnessing.

The turmoil in Kabul is echoed in the provinces and hinterland where recent weeks have witnessed an intensification of Pashtun and Tajik conflict as ethnic warlords battle one another. As Kabul's weak central government seeks to impose law and order and to control potential tax revenues in Afghanistan, warlord rivalries have flared into violence in northern, eastern and western areas of the country among armed factions reluctant to surrender their own share of power and local wealth.

This dynamic is clearly evident in the western city of Herat where there have been reports of heavy fighting between ethnic Tajik and Pashtun militias.^[18] Here Tajik fighters under Herat's provincial governor, Ismail Khan,^[19] have been fighting militia of a rival Pashtun commander, Ammanullah Khan. Pashtuns are a minority in this area and they have complained bitterly of looting and oppression by Ismail Khan's armed followers. This combined with the feelings by Pashtuns that they are underrepresented in top positions in a central government dominated by minority Tajiks have made this region as well as others explosive power kegs. Such rivalries have the potential to embroil all of Afghanistan.

Conclusion

It is unrealistic to expect that Karzai's government in Kabul will have much significant control in the short term over regional and local power relationships that have long dominated. Kabul can serve a useful mediating role in conflicts at the regional level, but that is about all that can realistically be expected. The same holds true for reconstruction. Kabul with the international community can help to create blueprints for the development of educational, health, and commercial infrastructures, but the specific construction must be based on the specific needs and peculiarities of the locale or region.

The fragmentation and complexity of Afghanistan will continue to present challenges to reconstruction as well as to the vision of a peaceful, stable post-Taliban country free of terrorists. To understand Afghanistan, one must recognize and be sensitive to the fact that group identities and power relationships as well as coalitions are based on ethno-linguistic affinities.

This being said, it is extremely important that the United States and the international community not walk away from Afghanistan. If they do, they risk the same type of blowback experienced after the United States walked away in 1990 following the Soviets' withdrawal across the Amu Darya. Afghanistan is in need of massive political and economic reconstruction, but any international effort must recognize the realities of the local situation. If nuances such as ethno-linguistic fragmentations are not recognized, then political stability and reconstruction programs are unlikely to succeed.

If Afghanistan is not at least moderately reconstructed the odds of it again becoming a haven for terrorists are greatly magnified. Ultimately, the cost of Afghan reconstruction is a timely and cost effective investment that will pay for itself over the long term. The alternatives will be much more costly in terms of instability and conflict.

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References

1. Washington Post Foreign Service, "Karzai Swears in New Afghan Cabinet," Monday, June 24, 2002.
2. Pashtuns have traditionally been the dominant ethnic group and the Afghan state has in the past been

a tool for Pashtun domination. The second most prominent ethnic-linguistic group is the Tajiks who represent the Afghan Persian-speaking, non-tribal population. Tajiks dominated the Northern Alliance. Other prominent Afghan ethno-linguistic groups include the Uzbeks, Hazaras, Nuristani, Baluch and Brahau. The peaceful coexistence of the different groups has been destroyed by 23 years of war that witnessed scores of atrocities committed by one group against another. Yet each of these groups continue to dominate the lives of Afghans in particular regions and locales.

3. Interview of Senior U.S. Government Official.

4. It is interesting to note that even the Rome group of Zahir Shah, the former king, had very heavy non-Pashtun representation, including the group's leader in Bonn.

5. A Constitutional Loya Jirga is to be convened within 18 months of the establishment of the Transitional Authority, in order to adopt a new constitution Afghanistan. Upon the official transfer of power, all mujahideen, Afghan armed forces and armed groups in the country "shall come under the command and control of the Interim Authority, and be reorganized according to the requirement of the new Afghan security and armed forces." 6. Fahim, a Tajik from the Panjshir Valley, replaced Massoud as the military leader of the Northern Alliance after the legendary Afghan leader was assassinated. He played a key role in the ground war against the Taliban. The U.S. however has reportedly recently reevaluated its relationship with the Northern Alliance and its view of Fahim. One Western official with long experience in Afghanistan according to the *Washington Post* (Susan B. Glasser and Pamela Constable, "Tensions Rises Between Two Key Afghans: Defense Chief is Seen as Threat to Karzai and Nation's Stability," *The Washington Post*, 5 August 2002, A12) has stated that "The U.S. government is making a terrible mistake in supporting Fahim...The U.S. has the resources to understand this is not a reliable partner and that he could easily be replaced...Fahim's tendencies are those of a street thug." Fahim has an interesting past. Fahim reportedly replaced Najibullah as the head of KhAD (the Soviet's puppet PDPA's brutal secret police and intelligence agency during the Soviet occupation). He is close to the Russians (he was the clear Russian favorite to lead the Northern Alliance after the death of Massoud) and is extremely disliked by many Pashtuns, Hazaras and Uzbeks.

7. Washington Post Foreign Service, "Karzai Swears in New Afghan Cabinet," Monday, June 24, 2002.

8. Ibid.

9. *The Washington Post*, "Pashtuns Losing Faith in Karzai, U.S.," June 13, 2002, A-1.

10. Ibid.

11. Zadran is reported to control the three southeastern provinces of Khost, Paktia, and Paktika -- traditional Pashtun strongholds. Zadran has been part of a continuing conflict, in part, concerning the governorships of these three provinces. See *New York Times*, "Warlord Pushes For Control of a Corner of Afghanistan," 6 August 2002.

12. BBC Correspondent Kate Clark in Khost, Afghanistan, "Pashtuns Demand Greater Role in Afghanistan", *BBC News*, 25 July 2002.

13. Op. cit., *New York Times*, "Warlord Pushes For Control of a Corner of Afghanistan," 6 August 2002.

14. Susan B. Glasser and Pamela Constable, "Tensions Rises Between Two Key Afghans: Defense Chief is Seen as Threat to Karzai and Nation's Stability," *The Washington Post*, 5 August 2002, A1, A12.

15. Ibid, A1.

16. Ibid, A12.

17. Habibullah Ghazi, a Tajik, briefly held power in 1929 until he was overthrown and Pashtuns returned to power. Burhanuddin Rabbani Tajik leader of the Jamiat-i-Islami was an ineffectual Mujahideen President of pre-Taliban Afghanistan from June 1992 until the Taliban took Kabul in September of 1996. Rabbani then led the Northern Alliance. While he expected a position and initially lobbied hard for one in the Transitional Government, his past was too controversial. This was probably a result of massive distrust of Rabbani by Pashtuns (as well as by some of his fellow Tajiks) and his blame by many for the civil war, corruption and chaos of Afghanistan during his presidency that eventually lead to the rise of the Taliban. Moreover, the Pakistanis would not tolerate a position of power for Rabbani who they fought against for a decade.

18. For example, see *World-AP Asia*, "Warlords Battle in Afghanistan," 23 July 2002.

19. Ismail Khan has long been a power in Herat and Southwestern Afghanistan. He was a powerful Mujahideen leader during the Soviet-Afghan War. Khan was affiliated with Jamiat-i-Islami during the war with the Soviets and later was a member of the Northern Alliance. He has been Governor of Herat since April of 1992 and while he is a Sunni Persian speaker he has stated that he does not consider himself a Tajik.

