

UN unveils a quasi-colonial regime for Afghanistan

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After nine days of backroom haggling in the Petersberg hotel near Bonn, the UN conference on Afghanistan produced an outcome on Wednesday: the announcement of an interim administration of hand-picked Afghani political figures as the first step in a drawn-out political process that excludes any voice for ordinary Afghans and relegates elections to the distant future.

The agreement, which was dutifully signed by the Afghani delegations, has provoked some criticism from those Afghani powerbrokers who feel they have been shortchanged. But the most notable aspect of the deal is its quasi-colonial character. As in the case of Bosnia, Kosovo and East Timor, the major powers operating through the UN will wield considerable clout over the regime in Kabul.

The UN special envoy to Afghanistan, currently Lakhdar Brahimi, will oversee the implementation of all aspects of the agreement and ensure that the interim administration adheres to UN Security Council resolutions relating to the country. The UN will also supervise preparations for a *loya jirga*—an assembly of tribal leaders—to be convened in six months time to select a transitional authority to govern for another two years. The agreement gives the UN special envoy the formal power to break any political deadlock.

Behind these formal arrangements lies the economic, political and military muscle of the major powers, particularly the US, all of whom threatened to withhold financial aid if the Afghani delegates did not rubberstamp the UN framework. The agreement provides for a UN military force in Kabul and provision for its extension to other cities. But its size and composition are still the subject of contention.

The US, which has military forces operating without restriction throughout the country, has sought to retain its monopoly by limiting the deployment of foreign troops. Britain, France and other European powers have been pushing for a substantial military involvement, which would give them a greater say over the future of Afghanistan. The newly-anointed Foreign Minister, Abdullah Abdullah, previously the Northern Alliance foreign spokesman, has indicated, however, that the size of any UN force could be as low as 200 troops—leaving the US and the Northern Alliance as the only substantial military forces inside the country.

The puppet character of the new administration is highlighted by the man chosen as its head—Hamid Karzai. His main credentials for the job are, firstly, that he is a Pashtun tribal leader closely linked to the exiled king Zahir Shah and, secondly, that he is, as the US

press explains, “well regarded in Washington.” In the 1980s, Karzai ran the Peshawar office of Sebghatullah Mojadeddi, the leader of one of the seven Mujaheddin groups financed and armed by the CIA to fight against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul.

Following the fall of the pro-Soviet Najibullah administration in 1992, Mojadeddi briefly held the post of president and rewarded his spokesman Karzai with the post of deputy foreign minister. Karzai retained the position after Burhanuddin Rabbani took over the presidency, but resigned in 1994 when it became obvious that the small Mojadeddi faction had no real power.

Karzai is clearly regarded in Washington as an important political “asset”. He has worked closely with the CIA over the last two months to foment an anti-Taliban revolt in southern Afghanistan among the influential Popolzai clan, which he heads. In early November, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld announced that a special operations team had been dispatched to “extract” Karzai and his followers, who were under threat from Taliban troops.

Karzai did not attend the Bonn meeting as he was in Afghanistan negotiating for the surrender of Kandahar. His deal with Taliban leaders, under which their Afghani fighters would go free while their foreign supporters are detained, has brought him into conflict with Washington in the past two days. The Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar would be offered amnesty if he “renounced terrorism”.

Karzai’s proposal drew an immediate, sharp rebuke from Washington. Defence Secretary Rumsfeld insisted that Mullah Omar had to be detained and put on trial, adding that the US had put “our very strong view on this”. “Our cooperation and assistance with those people would clearly take a turn south if something were to be done ... that is inconsistent with what I have said... To the extent that our goals are frustrated and opposed, we would prefer to work with other people,” he bluntly warned.

Karzai has been left trying to straddle the demands of the US and those of Pashtun tribal leaders among whom there are still sympathies for the Taliban. Karzai himself backed the Taliban with money and arms when they were formed in 1994. In 1996, he was offered the job of UN representative by the Taliban. He only turned against the Taliban leadership in 1999 after his father was assassinated—on their orders, according to his family.

The outcome of the deal in Kandahar remains unclear. Karzai promptly responded to Rumsfeld’s diktat by declaring: “Of course, I want to arrest him [Omar]. I have given him every chance

to denounce terrorism and now the time has run out.” At the same time, however, it appears that the Taliban fighters have fled the city along with Mullah Omar—conveniently letting Karzai off the hook.

The incident in Kandahar underscores the political contradictions that underlie Karzai’s government. The UN and the US have imposed an agreement on Afghanistan and inserted a pliable administration to do their bidding. But after two decades of war, the country is riven with competing ethnic, religious and tribal loyalties which threaten to undermine the regime from the outset. Each of the new ministers faces the same difficulties as Karzai: retaining the support of the major powers while at the same time advancing the interests of their own local constituency.

The UN has described the interim administration as the first step towards “a broad-based, gender-sensitive, multi-ethnic and fully representative government”. This fine-sounding diplomatic phrase simply disguises the narrow base of the administration, which essentially rests on two props: the Northern Alliance, which is itself a loose coalition of warlords and militia groups based among ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras, and the former king and his camp followers in Rome. The 87-year-old Zahir Shah, who has been in exile since 1973, derives his support mainly from ethnic Pashtuns, particularly the dominant Durrani tribe.

The Northern Alliance, whose militia control most of the north and west of the country, including Kabul, conceded the top job to the royalists. In return, however, it has taken 17 of 30 ministerial posts, including the key positions of foreign affairs, defence and interior. The Rome group, as the royalists are known, have nine of the remaining positions, leaving just four for the other two factions represented at Bonn—the Pakistani-backed Peshawar group and the Iranian-backed Cyprus group.

The Bonn conference has already provoked sharp tensions within and between the Afghani factions. In the course of the meeting, a concerted effort was made to sideline Northern Alliance leader Rabbani, who is still nominally recognised by the UN as Afghanistan’s head of state. The final agreement expressed its “deep appreciation” to Rabbani for “his readiness to transfer power” but gave him no post in the new regime. Three younger figures—Abdullah Abdullah, Yunus Qanooni and Mohammad Qaseem Fahim—have been promoted ahead of him to the top positions of foreign affairs, interior and defence.

Since the mid-1990s, Rabbani has developed close ties with Russia and Iran—two of the Northern Alliance’s main backers. The US is no doubt calculating that the new faces will be more amenable to its interests. The three are all closely connected to the former Northern Alliance military commander Ahmad Shah Masud who was assassinated on September 9 in a suicide bomb attack. Fahim, who took over from Masud as Northern alliance defence chief, has been working very closely with the US military over the last two months.

According to some reports, Rabbani did not step aside quietly. His list of nominees for the new administration omitted two of his main rivals—Qanooni and Abdullah. However, his proposal was simply ignored and the two names were reinserted by the Northern Alliance delegation in Bonn, which was headed by Qanooni. While Rabbani, a conservative Islamic academic, has no

fundamental disagreement with the UN plan, he could become a gathering point for opposition and discontent.

The Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum, who is also part of the Northern Alliance, announced on Thursday that he will “boycott” the government. He claims that a deal to give his faction the post of foreign affairs was broken. “It is a humiliation for us,” Dostum said, after his Jombesh-e-Melli group was given the ministries of agriculture, mining and industry. He warned that he would deny government officials access to the northern areas under his control, where Afghanistan’s oil and gas reserves are located.

Wahidullah Sabawoon, the Northern Alliance’s finance minister, has also attacked the agreement for failing to allocate a position to his Hizb-e-Islami party. He said he would attempt to rewrite the deal once the negotiating team had returned to Kabul. The finance post was handed to a member of the royalist faction—Hedayat Amin Arsala, a former World Bank official.

Neither of the two smaller exile groups were pleased with the outcome. Head of the Peshawar group, Ahmed Gailani, branded the allocation of ministries as “unjust”. He indicated, however, that he would bide his time until the *loya jirga* is convened. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who is associated with the Cyprus group of Afghan exiles in Iran, was more strident, accusing the US of imposing the deal. “That puts in doubt the legitimacy of the authority which will emerge from this conference,” he said.

Hekmatyar previously led Hizb-e-Islami, which was the major beneficiary of CIA funding in the 1980s. Following the fall of Najibullah in 1992, the bitter feuding between Hekmatyar and Rabbani resulted in thousands of civilian deaths in Kabul and the destruction of large sections of the capital. Virtually all of the factions manoeuvring to dominate the new administration trace their origins to the US-backed anti-communist Mujaheddin groups which carved up the country into individual fiefdoms in the 1990s.

How far the contending parties take their criticisms of the Bonn agreement remains to be seen. The new administration is due to take office on December 22. It will preside over a country that is in ruins economically and in which an estimated seven million people lack adequate food, shelter and clothing. Already the old political patterns have reemerged as rival warlords and militia groups seek to reestablish control of their former territories. The UN, with the backing of Washington, is seeking to impose its own regime, held together with two crude tools: the bribe of economic aid, and, if that fails, the threat of further military measures.



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