

An unstable new administration undemocratically installed in Afghanistan

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Afghanistan's transitional administration was sworn in on June 24 at a brief ceremony in the grounds of the presidential palace. It is a large unstable mix of appointees designed to appease a myriad of competing factional interests. None of the 29 ministers were elected—either directly or indirectly. The country's transitional president Hamid Karzai chose all of them after days of intriguing and backroom horse-trading involving various factional leaders and representatives of the UN and major powers.

Karzai's claim to power has only the barest veneer of legitimacy. He won a vote for the top job at the recent *loya jirga* or grand tribal assembly, after American and other foreign "observers" pressured his two major rivals—the former king Zahir Shah and the former president Burhanuddin Rabbani—to pull out of the contest. On the last day of the gathering, Karzai presented 13 of his ministerial appointees to the 1,600 carefully screened *loya jirga* delegates. There was no debate or election—the ministers were "approved" in a matter of minutes by a show of hands.

The previous interim administration was installed by a UN organised conference in Bonn last December. Karzai's main qualifications for the post of interim chairman were his previous close association with Washington, including the CIA, stretching back to the 1980s and his ethnicity. He is a tribal leader of the Pashtun majority. The remaining posts were chosen to pay off the various militia groups that were instrumental in the US military operation to topple the former Taliban regime—in particular, the Northern Alliance, which is based among the Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara minorities.

The same ethnic and religious rivalries lie behind the choices for the new transitional administration, with Washington exercising an effective behind-the-scenes veto. The key consideration involved in the factional haggling has been who controls the guns and the money?

In the previous administration three of the top posts, defence, interior and foreign affairs, were held by Northern Alliance leaders—General Qassim Fahim, Younis Qanooni and Dr Abdullah Abdullah, respectively. All three are Tajiks from the Panjshir Valley—proteges of the militia leader Ahmad Shah Masud who was assassinated last September.

Fahim and Abdullah retained their posts. In a bid to quell criticisms of the trio by Pashtun leaders, Qanooni offered to resign. But he clearly expected another powerful post in return for his gesture. When offered the job of education minister, Qanooni threatened to leave the government and form an opposition political party. Karzai only wooed him back into the cabinet by creating a special post of presidential security adviser.

Just prior to the swearing in ceremony, Karzai established another special presidential security adviser to pacify supporters of the former monarch, who had been largely sidelined from the cabinet. Royalists Arsala Amin and Rasool Amin lost their finance and education posts. Zalmay Rassool, the former aviation minister and close aide to Zahir Shah, will focus on international security relations while Qanooni will advise the president on internal security affairs. In addition, there is the interior minister—80-year-old Taj Mohammed Wardak, an ethnic Pashtun and Paktia provincial governor.

The fact that three people have been appointed to cabinet-level security posts simply underscores the level of distrust between various factions. None of them are prepared to see their rivals gain sole control over the security apparatus. The country is dominated by a myriad of competing warlords, militia commanders and tribal leaders—large and small. Several have carved out substantial regional fiefdoms—Rashid Dostum in Mazar-i-Sharif and Ismail Khan in Herat—that control everything from taxes to the police.

In Kabul, the police and security agents are largely

drawn from Northern Alliance militia troops loyal to Qanooni and Fahim. Twelve of the 15 police stations in the capital are commanded by Tajiks from the Panjshir Valley. Another—Mohammed Arif—has retained control of the national intelligence agency, which was criticised for its heavy-handed presence at the *loya jirga*. Following the announcement that Wardak would replace Qanooni as interior minister, Tajik police and troops initially protested with roadblocks and work stoppages.

Fahim has undisputed control over the Defence Ministry. However, a number of powerful regional warlords have been appointed to a national defence commission, including Ismail Khan, Rashid Dostum and his local rival Atta Mohammed, along with Gul Agha from Kandahar. Unlike other commissions that report to Karzai, Fahim retains complete authority over the national defence commission.

Fahim was also been appointed as one of the country's vice-presidents, further strengthening his hand in the new administration. Initially the number of vice-presidents was to be three, then the figure was expanded to four and now five, in a bid to provide for various regional, ethnic and religious interests. The others—including Hazara leader Karim Khalili; Haji Abdul Qadir, the Pashtun governor of Nangarhar province; and Uzbek leader Nematullah Shahrani—were installed in a separate ceremony on June 27.

Karzai has kept a tight grip over the purse strings by appointing his senior adviser Ashraf Gani, a former World Bank official, to the top economic post of finance minister. Gani will effectively control the distribution of \$1.8 billion in promised foreign aid this year. Another former World Bank official Juma Mohammedi has been installed as mines minister.

The anti-democratic character of the *loya jirga* and the cabinet choices has attracted considerable criticism, inside and outside Afghanistan. An article entitled “Afghanistan gets US-scripted transitional government” in the latest issue of the British based newspaper, *The Friday Times* (TFT), commented: “From all indications, nothing has gone against the pre- *loya jirga* script prepared by the United States to configure the transitional dispensation for Afghanistan. Most critics told TFT there has been no attempt to put down warlordism that has laid the country waste in the last two decades.”

“They are all in the cabinet. Their role has in fact been sanctified,” one analyst in Kabul told the newspaper. A researcher for the US based Human Rights Watch, Saman Zia-Zarifi told the TFT: “Afghanistan’s warlords are

stronger today than they were 10 days ago before the *loya jirga* started. Short-term expediency has clearly triumphed over human rights.”

In a separate press statement, Human Rights Watch drew particular attention to the appointment of a conservative Islamic cleric, Fazul Hadi Shinwari as the country’s chief justice, saying it raised serious human rights concerns. “Shinwari was quoted in press interviews in January as saying that Sharia [Islamic] punishments including stoning and amputation would be retained, albeit with stricter due process guarantees than under the Taliban,” it stated.

Shinwari and other Islamic leaders have already begun imposing their reactionary social views, effectively blocking the reappointment of Sima Samar as women’s affairs minister. She has been subject to a barrage of criticisms and threats following allegations that she told a Canadian newspaper that she opposed Sharia law. Shinwari declared that her words were “against the Islamic nation of Afghanistan”. Others denounced her as the “Salman Rushdie of Afghanistan”—with the implication that she should be put to death. Samar has been installed as the head of the country’s human rights commission.

The influence of Shinwari and other conservative clerics is just one indication of the undemocratic character of the entire process. The Karzai cabinet is the outcome of sordid deals done among factional leaders—approved at every step by the US and other major powers to ensure their interests in the region are safeguarded. The vast majority of Afghan people have had no say at all in the administration that will dictate their lives.



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