In line with US demands, Afghan parliament rejects cabinet proposals

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Last Saturday, the Afghan parliament refused to endorse 17 of the 24 cabinet ministers proposed by President Hamid Karzai, who was named the winner of the fraudulent elections held last August. What on the surface appeared to be a considerable blow to Karzai was more akin to a political charade. A cabinet is now being assembled consisting only of individuals who have been vetted and deemed acceptable by the Obama administration and its main NATO allies.

The majority of the rejected ministers are linked with either Karzai's inner circle or the ethnic Tajik, Uzbek and Hazari warlord factions that assisted the US in ousting the predominantly ethnic Pashtun Taliban in 2001. For the past eight years, the US-backed groupings have presided over the wholesale plunder of state resources and an estimated $18 billion in so-called international aid donations. Key Karzai allies are accused of drug running.

As the resistance against the US/NATO occupation has intensified, fueled by the rampant corruption of Karzai's administration and Pashtun resentment of the power of the warlords, there have been increasingly strident demands by the occupying powers for a government "clean up". Sidelining some of the most prominent warlords is also intended to try to breathe life back into the discredited claims that the US-led occupation has brought "democracy" to the Afghan people.

When Karzai announced his proposed cabinet last month, it was clear he had sought to balance between the demands of the occupation forces and paying off the regional powerbrokers and factions that assisted him to rig the election. The parliament served as the mechanism to overturn his attempted compromise. Once parliament rejects a ministerial candidate, they cannot be re-nominated.

The highest-profile figure rejected was ethnic Tajik powerbroker Mohammad Ismael Khan. A leading commander of the anti-Soviet mujahaddin in the 1980s, he controlled the western city of Herat until the Taliban drove his forces out in 1996. His militia retreated over the border into Iran, where it received aid from Tehran. Backed by the Iranian government, Khan returned after the US invasion and rapidly rebuilt his fiefdom in Herat.

In 2004, Washington took initial steps to marginalise him, suspicious of his relations with Iran and angry over his refusal to pay the central government in Kabul the revenues from taxes on the lucrative cross-border trade. Under US pressure, Karzai dismissed him as the governor of Herat province in 2004 and instead made him the water and energy minister. Violent clashes between his forces and the militia of the new governor left more than 100 dead. He still exerts a major influence in the city.

Khan backed Karzai in last year's election and his cabinet reappointment was the reward. Behind-the-scenes, however, clearly there has been a campaign by US and NATO officials to ensure he was not endorsed.

Three proposed ministers who were considered proxies of Uzbek warlord Rashid Dostum were also rejected. Dostum essentially rules the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif. After recapturing the city from the Taliban during the US invasion, his militia suffocated more than 2,000 prisoners to death.

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The Obama administration pushed Karzai to exclude Dostum's faction from central government positions as evidence that steps were being taken against warlordism. He has been able to retain control of Mazar-i-Sharif, however, and maintains his large force of Uzbek militiamen. He backed Karzai in the election and expected cabinet representation.

Dostum responded to the rejection of his nominees with a statement labelling it a "kind of conspiracy" against ethnic Uzbeks, but made clear he would accept a decision that he knows was made in Washington.

The proposed ministers who were viewed as representatives of ethnic Hazara warlord Haji Mohammed Mohaqiq were also rejected. Mohaqiq's faction has longstanding ties to Iran. Like Dostum, Mohaqiq accused the parliamentary majority of voting on the basis of the "ethnicity" of the candidates.

The main qualification of the seven men who were accepted by the parliament was that they had Washington's backing. They include Defence Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak, Finance Minister Omar Zakhailwal, Interior Minister Mohammad Asif Rahimi and Mines Minister Wahidullah Sharani.

Sharani, a western-educated economist who has worked for international institutions such as the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank, was nominated for the mines portfolio under direct pressure from Washington. The US accused the previous minister of taking a $30 million bribe to award a massive $3 billion copper project in eastern Afghanistan to a Chinese company. He was dumped from the cabinet. Sharani can be expected to award future contracts to mining interests from the US and other occupying powers.

Abdul Rahim Wardak, who has been defence minister since 2004, reportedly has the confidence of Obama's special envoy to Afghanistan, Richard Holbrooke, and senior US military commanders. His task over the next several years will be to spend tens of billions of dollars to expand the Afghan Army from 100,000 to as many as 400,000 troops, to bear the brunt of the fighting against the Taliban.

The UN representative in Afghanistan, Kai Eide, expressed frustration at the failure of the parliament to endorse Karzai's cabinet, calling it a "setback" and complaining that it "prolongs the situation without a functioning government… that has lasted since last summer". By contrast, the Obama administration said nothing to suggest it was displeased with the outcome. The new list of proposed ministers is likely to include many more of the people that Washington wants in its puppet government.

Karzai has issued a decree to prevent the parliament taking a six-week winter break until the formation of the cabinet is finalised. A new cabinet list will be presented for endorsement as early as Sunday.

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