

Afghan factions form power-sharing government

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Months of cajoling by the Obama administration finally compelled the two candidates in Afghanistan's disputed June 14 presidential election to announce a complex power-sharing arrangement on Sunday.

The agreement between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah will see Ghani, a US-trained economist, former World Bank official and ex-finance minister sworn in as president to replace Hamid Karzai. Abdullah, a former foreign minister who stood in both the 2009 and 2014 elections, will become the government's "chief executive," with a still vaguely defined role. Details of the deal remain unclear, indicating that it is likely to be highly fragile.

For the United States, the pact opens the way for Ghani and Abdullah to meet their mutual pledge to sign a status of forces agreement (SOFA) with Washington that will enable American forces to continue to operate with impunity in Afghanistan after the formal conclusion of US and NATO military operations at the end of the year. Karzai refused to sign such a pact during his final year in office, cynically declaring that he objected to the scale of civilian casualties caused by US air strikes and special forces' raids, after having collaborated with the carnage since the 2001 invasion.

The notion of a power-sharing deal was cooked up during days of negotiations in July, personally directed by US Secretary of State John Kerry. Frantic talks were organised, with powerbrokers supporting Abdullah threatening to launch a coup on the basis of allegations that Ghani's camp rigged his purported victory in the election. Abdullah charged that as many as two million of eight million votes cast were dubious.

To prevent open conflict, Kerry secured agreement from both sides for a recount of the votes; for the victor to be named president; for the loser to become a de facto prime minister with certain executive powers; and

for the constitution to be revised in 2016 to formalise the division of powers.

After two months of ongoing tensions over the vote recount, Sunday's announcement means that final election results will not be published at all. Ghani will be simply sworn in as president, possibly as soon as September 29. At a joint press conference on Sunday in the capital Kabul, Ghani, Abdullah and Karzai each declared their support for the arrangement.

The Obama administration hailed the sordid outcome as "an important opportunity for unity and increased stability in Afghanistan." In reality, the driving force behind the deal is the mounting instability of the entire puppet state created during the 13-year US-led occupation of Afghanistan, following the overthrow of the Taliban Islamist regime in late 2001.

As International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops—who are overwhelmingly American—have been withdrawn and the Afghan Army given responsibility for frontline fighting, Taliban insurgents have stepped up their efforts to establish control over territory. According to *New York Times* sources, at least 700 Taliban offensives were conducted in the first six months of 2014, during which 1,368 government police and 800 troops were killed. Areas of the southern province of Helmand, for example, where British forces conducted years of operations, have largely fallen back into the hands of the insurgency.

Financially, the Afghan state is bankrupt. The *Times* reported on September 21 that the government in Kabul is not raising sufficient revenue to even pay the wages of public servants. It depends completely on international donations, which were being held up by the US and its allies in order to increase the pressure for a political deal.

Washington is expected to continue to provide

between \$5 billion and \$8 billion a year, along with additional amounts from other countries, which will mostly flow into the pockets of the rival cliques represented by Ghani and Abdullah.

Ghani's campaign for president was backed by a number of ethnic Pashtun warlords in southern and eastern Afghanistan and ethnic Uzbek strongman Abdul Rashid Dostum, who all previously supported Karzai because they were largely left alone to rule over their territories. Abdullah's key support base was powerbrokers of the former Northern Alliance, which fought the Taliban during the 1990s and early 2000s from the predominantly ethnic Tajik regions of the country's north and west.

Since the US-led invasion, there has been almost no durable economic development. The Afghan people face endemic unemployment and poverty. The primary source of wealth generation for the various warlords and powerbrokers that collaborated with the occupation will remain siphoning off the lions' share of international aid, combined with profits from the rampant export of opium and heroin.

Afghanistan currently produces as much as 75 percent of the world's illegal opium—some 5.5 million kilograms. A May report by the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction commented: "Drug labs, storage sites, and major trafficking networks are concentrated in rural areas that are increasingly off-limits to Afghan forces due to the ISAF drawdown and declining security in these areas."

In a scathing speech earlier this month, John Spoko, the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, declared that the US had spent over \$104 billion to create what "could become a narco-criminal state."

Washington will keep propping up such a state, nevertheless. A 5,000- to 7,000-strong military force will remain in Afghanistan at places such as the Bagram Air Base, continuing air strikes, drone attacks and special forces operations against alleged threats to the US puppet government in Kabul.

The social and political conditions in Afghanistan as the formal occupation draws to an end underscore the fact that the motives for the 2001 invasion were never to combat terrorism, let alone bring democracy to the Afghan people. The only purpose was to establish a US military footprint in the strategic and energy-rich

Central Asian region, which the Obama administration has no intention of relinquishing.



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