

# ANALYSIS OF THE AFGHAN DEFENSE APPOINTMENTS

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Building a legitimate and effective Afghan National Army (ANA) supported by reliable civilian leadership in the Afghan Ministry of Defense (MoD) is a prerequisite to Afghanistan's enduring stability. A reshuffle of senior ANA and MoD officials in late June 2010 was thus a noteworthy development with ramifications for the United States and ISAF's long term goals for the Afghan state.<sup>1</sup>

The June ANA and MoD appointments follow the removal of Afghanistan's Minister of the Interior (MoI) Hanif Atmar and National Directorate of Security (NDS) chief Amrullah Saleh. President Karzai stated that he had lost confidence in Atmar and Saleh following a security breach at the Peace Jirga, but many sources point to preexisting tension between Karzai and the two men as the real cause of the resignations. Both men had challenged Karzai on his plans to reconcile and reintegrate Taliban fighters.<sup>2</sup> As one analyst suggested, the removal of Atmar and Saleh "speaks volumes about the growing paranoia in the palace about the loyalties of those who have been central to the Karzai administration for the last several years."<sup>3</sup>

When taken together, this reshuffle of the leadership of Afghanistan's security forces is one of the most significant political developments in Afghanistan this year. The Army and MoD appointments occurred in the context of increasing ethnic factionalism, both in the ANA and in Afghan politics more generally. Recent reporting indicates that Karzai has failed to check factionalism within the army and the MoD and that

some senior military commanders act on behalf of the powerbrokers who back them, rather than working for the long term institutional strength of the ANA.<sup>4</sup>

According to a recent report by the International Crisis Group, four main factions dominate the army: "Pashtuns allied with Wardak or affiliated with the Mahaz-e Milliy-e Islami Afghanistan party; Tajiks allied with Bismillah Khan and Shura-ye Nazar; Uzbeks allied with Lieutenant General Hamayoun Fauzi, MOD's deputy director of personnel and education; and Hazaras allied with Lieutenant General Baz Mohammad Jawhari, deputy director of MOD's material and technology department."<sup>5</sup> Almost ninety percent of the army is either Pashtun or Tajik.<sup>6</sup> In a June 2010 interview Admiral Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that the Tajik-Pashtun antagonism has "the potential to really tear this country apart."<sup>7</sup> Ethnic tensions are particularly problematic in the security forces, where the divided loyalty of officers and soldiers challenges the development of a truly unified national force and the entrenchment of patronage networks undermines the institution while solidifying the influence of powerbrokers.

Karzai has repeatedly stated that maintaining an ethnic balance within his government is a high priority, but developments over the last several months have raised the possibility that the careful ethnic balance may be breaking down. Karzai used the vacancies caused by the resignations of Atmar and Saleh to accomplish a broader rearrangement of the leadership of the MoD and within the Army.<sup>8</sup>

The most relevant appointments are:

*Bismillah Khan – Minister of the Interior*

Bismillah Khan is a powerful Tajik, and had been serving as Chief of Staff of the Army since November 2002. He was the Deputy Minister of Defense of the Northern Alliance and is politically linked to Shura-ye Nazar, a network of Tajiks who were aligned with Ahmad Shah Massoud during the civil war. Along with Vice President Muhammad Fahim, Bismillah Khan is one of the few remaining members of the once powerful “Panjshiri” group in the government.<sup>9</sup> Though his appointment may seem like a promotion, Karzai may have in fact weakened Bismillah Khan by separating him from the power base he has built in the army and placing him in a ministry bogged down in bureaucracy. Additionally, the influence of the Ministry of the Interior is limited in the provinces by the influence of local powerbrokers, and by the MoI’s reliance on Presidential approval for Provincial level appointments.

*Lt.Gen. Sher Muhammad Karimi – Chief of Staff of the Army*

Karimi, a Pashtun, has been nominated to replace Bismillah Khan. He previously held the post of Chief of Operations, and some American and ISAF commanders had hoped for his promotion because of his fluent English and personal connections with U.S. Special Forces.<sup>10</sup> He attended the U.S. Army Ranger and Special Forces schools and then returned to Afghanistan to serve in the pre-communist army.<sup>11</sup> The communist regime imprisoned him for fifteen months because of his Western ties, and after his release he served briefly in the communist army before joining the mujahedeen.<sup>12</sup> During the Taliban rule, he took refuge in Pakistan, and since 2001 has represented the Afghan government in high-level talks with Pakistan.<sup>13</sup>

*Lt.Gen. Mohammad Akram – Vice Chief of Staff of the Army*

Karimi’s deputy will be Mohammad Akram, another Pashtun. Akram most recently served as first deputy minister of defense. Akram is from Kandahar and served as the commander of southern forces under the communist

regime.<sup>14</sup> During his tenure at the MoD, Akram was responsible for the government’s Taliban reconciliation program.<sup>15,16</sup>

*Enayatullah Nazari – First Deputy to the Minister of Defense*

Akram has been replaced by Enayatullah Nazari, a Tajik from Parwan. Nazari had been nominated earlier in 2010 as Minister of Refugee Affairs, but Parliament rejected him in February.<sup>17</sup> Nazari has no military or security experience;<sup>18</sup> he has a degree in political science and law, and worked for the Ministry of Justice and the Attorney’s Office under both the communist and mujahedeen regimes.<sup>19</sup> As one of the dwindling number of Tajiks in the upper leadership of the defense sector, it is unclear how much influence he will actually have.<sup>20</sup> His boss, Minister of Defense Rahim Wardak, has held his position since 2004, and has a loyal following in the MoD and Army and a close but complicated relationship with Karzai.

*Maj. Gen. Murad Ali Murad – Commander of Ground Force of Afghan National Army*

Murad is a Hazara, and previously commanded the army corps in northern Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup> It is unclear exactly what role the “commander of ground forces” plays; is not a position that is referenced publicly.<sup>22</sup> This suggests that Murad’s new appointment may not be of comparable functional significance to the first four appointments.

## ANALYSIS

The consolidation of meaningful leadership positions among Pashtuns reflects Karzai’s increasing political insecurity and a possible mistrust of the army.<sup>23</sup> Karzai is wary of potential challenges to his political power and routinely moves military commander and governors to prevent them from accumulating independent powerbases in any one position. Certainly the move of Bismillah Khan from the Army to the Ministry of Interior will weaken the threat he presents to Karzai. However, the replacement of Bismillah Khan with a Pashtun will not eliminate factions within the ANA; roughly forty percent of the army is Tajik, and Tajiks “dominate the officer

and NCO ranks.”<sup>24</sup> This dynamic generates a dangerous potential for dissension between Tajik officers and the overwhelmingly Pashtun senior leadership.

A number of leading Afghan political figures have argued that non-Pashtun groups have been increasingly marginalized in the broader Karzai administration since Karzai began his second term in November 2009. Though he promised cabinet positions and governorships to many communities in exchange for support during the 2009 election, he has failed to deliver on many of those promises. In particular, Mohammad Mohaqeq, leader of the mainly Hazara Hezb-e Wahdat Party, claims Karzai promised five Hazara ministers, but Karzai has been unable to deliver the confirmation of any Hazara cabinet nominees, angering the Hazara community.<sup>25</sup> The rejection of the Hazara nominees appears due to Karzai’s unwillingness to pressure Parliament for their appointment, and may be a means for Karzai to avoid explicitly breaking promises he does not intend to keep.<sup>26</sup> The cause is less relevant than the public reaction. General Dostum<sup>27</sup> has joined Mohaqeq<sup>28</sup> in criticizing Karzai for ethnic favoritism and questioned the legitimacy of his government. Reconciliation efforts and a reported deepening of ties with Pakistan have also alienated non-Pashtun minorities. Leaders of Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek communities have already pledged to resist any government that incorporates the Taliban.<sup>29</sup>

It is important to be aware both of Karzai’s attempts to consolidate power and of the reaction of minority groups. In the past, Karzai has maintained a coalition of support by co-opting important leaders such as General Dostum and Mohammed Fahim. If minority groups feel that they no longer have a stake in the government or if are no longer effectively co-opted by Karzai, they may divest from the central government and begin to prepare for a renewed civil war. Particularly within the larger context of increasing politicization of ethnicity, all segments of the population must feel they are represented in the army or it will be difficult for them to fully trust the government with ensuring their security. Ethnic factionalism within the ANA and MoD must be addressed before the institution can be considered an effective national security force.

## ENDNOTES

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