



BULLETIN

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Crisis Over Forming of Afghanistan's New Government

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President Hamid Karzaj's new Afghan government was sworn in only on 18 January 2010. The lengthy process of forming the government compounded Afghanistan's political crisis triggered by election-rigging during the presidential election. Given the controversies over the new government and the country's unstable internal situation, the London conference on Afghanistan scheduled for 28 January is unlikely to achieve its aims.

Determinants. Campaigning before the 2009 presidential election, the incumbent president Hamid Karzaj courted the support of local community leaders promising them high positions in a government to be formed after the election—provided he won. In fact, though, the president was offering more than he could deliver, because the hopefuls among his campaign allies vastly outnumbered the offices that were his to fill. This bred political tensions and a climate of mistrust among Afghanistan's main political forces.

The first round of election on 20 August 2009 exposed these leaders'—Karzaj's allies'—inability to ensure to him the winning support of their communities. What gave Karzaj his success in the voting was election-rigging, which was possible because of the hold the president had over the local administration authorities and central institutions responsible for the voting. The protracted dispute over the validity of the election which followed ultimately led to a decision to hold a runoff election between Karzaj and Abdullah Abdullah, the opposition candidate. However, the latter boycotted the runoff, which won Karzaj the reelection. All these developments deepened the negative tendencies in Afghan politics.

Crisis over Forming of Government. Five weeks after his swearing-in on 19 November 2009, President Karzaj presented a proposed 24-member Cabinet. The candidates to major ministerial positions (defense, internal affairs, education and finance) were his closest co-workers; nominations to the remaining positions were in line with Karzaj's pre-election agreements with the local leaders. Voting on 2 January 2010 the Parliament approved only seven ministers, most of whom were the president's associates. The next vote (16 January 2010) on another proposal on the composition of the government was much the same story: of the seventeen candidates the parliament approved seven. Like on the previous occasion, the seven were close to the president and the candidates connected with Karzaj's campaign allies were rejected. By force of a special decree the ministerial positions left vacant by the Parliament's decision were filled by President Karzaj with interim appointees. This means that no Afghan government will be formed before the London international conference on the stabilization of Afghanistan scheduled for 28 January 2010. This is an important insofar as one of the principal aims of the conference is to expedite the turning over of responsibility for the situation in Afghanistan to the authorities in Kabul, in accordance with the key element of the international communities' current strategy on Afghanistan.

The rejection by the parliament, in the voting on the composition of government, of the nominees affiliated with the local leaders who had backed Karzaj in the August election bolstered the president's position and autonomy. By proposing these candidates regardless of their often negligible competencies (these were questioned in particular by the states involved in the Afghan mission) Karzaj formally fulfilled his pre-election promises to his political allies. Then, the rejection of these nominations by the parliament made him free both to disclaim responsibility for the failure to actually

deliver on the pre-election promises and to become politically independent of these uncomfortable allies. As an additional bonus, the rejection of the incompetent candidates was well received by the Western states.

In fact the present composition of the Cabinet, dominated as it is by the president's closest aides some of whom (Defense Minister Rahim Wardak and Minister of the Interior Hanif Atmar) enjoy support of the international community, suits Karzaj well. At the same time, with the seven ministerial vacancies he can keep playing his political game with the ethnic and tribal chiefs and with the Western states which expect these positions to be filled on merit. The decision to include in the government several persons linked with certain rebel groups is important in that it encourages a part of the rebels to give up fighting, an incentive additionally reinforced by an announcement that at the London conference President Karzaj will unveil a new offer of in-cash and-in kind aid to the rebels in return for giving up arms. The success, even partial, of these efforts would mean an even further strengthening of Karzaj's position in the internal dimension, particularly as a firm majority of the rebels are, like the president himself, Pashtuns.

Yet offers like that, addressed to the armed (predominately Pashtun) opposition, have aroused objections by other ethnic groups, in particular of the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazars living in the north and center of the country. They already accuse the authorities in Kabul—not without reason—of marginalizing them politically and of showing favoritism to the Pashtun regions and neglecting others as aid is distributed. The inclusion in the government of few leaders of these communities, including Vice-presidents Marshall Qasim Fahim (a Tajik) and Karim Khalil (a Hasar), has not disproved the belief in the marginalization of the non-Pashtun ethnicities because their position in the government is marginal, as evidenced by the government-forming process. Offers of aid in return for giving up fighting made to the rebels have aggravated the feeling of marginalization in the non-Pashtun ethnic groups and they might have the effect of fueling rather than reducing instability, in particular in the north of the country. What's more, the rebels' latest operations, such as the attacks in Kabul on the day of swearing-in the new authorities, are hardly a signal of the will to reach an understanding.

As it is, the successes the President scores as he seeks to bolster his personal position have deepened the political crisis in Afghanistan. Moreover, they could prove short-lived if the local leaders, who have supported Karzaj so far but are disappointed with their real stake in the new government, turn again against the president.

By pushing for a parliamentary election (it is already tentatively scheduled for this 22 May) the new government has added to the strain. Both the Abdullah-led opposition and the President's current allies fear that Karzaj will want to use this election to get a firmer grip on the Lower House. These concerns are fuelled by the fact that no reform of the electoral system has been undertaken to eliminate the mechanisms which have facilitated electoral fraud. With no guarantees of a democratic and transparent parliamentary election the opposition centered round Abdullah might boycott the ballot so as not to lend credibility to potential electoral fraud. This would add to the present deficit of legitimacy in the authorities and could ultimately lead to the radicalization of the attitude and activities of the opposition.

Conclusions. Appealing as the vision of a stronger Karzaj presidency may be in the perspective of the transition of responsibilities to the Afghans, the strengthening of the president's influence has involved the marginalization of more and more ethnic and political groups, just as it has conserved the immaturity of the Afghan political scene. This means that the president's position is being built up at the expense of the stability and efficiency of the Afghan state. Sustained instability in internal politics facilitates the rebels' operations and acts as a disincentive for them to engage in negotiations on ending hostilities. Under the circumstances, chances for any genuine progress towards the stabilization of Afghanistan being made at the London conference are small. As things are, to expedite the transfer of responsibility for the situation in the country to the Afghan authorities would be ill-advised indeed. Neither is there much scope for developing an attractive reconciliation offer for the rebels, one that would serve the stabilization of the country. Putting Afghanistan's political scene in order is a prerequisite for both these targets—yet this is achievable only in a longer term and only subject to effective re-construction of Afghanistan's present political system.