Changes Expected in Afghan Political Landscape Leading Up to 2014

Open source reporting indicates the Afghan political landscape, presently dominated by four political groupings and a number of prominent politicians, is likely to undergo further changes in the lead-up to the presidential elections and withdrawal of ISAF forces in 2014. Differing views of the Taliban threat as ISAF withdraws is likely to help drive the realignment and consolidation of political forces. This realignment may result in two major groupings: President Hamid Karzai and allies keen on working with the Taliban versus former anti-Taliban forces and others opposed to the government's alleged appeasement toward the militants. Such consolidation would likely lead the emerging generation of younger leaders to choose between joining one of the groupings or risk being marginalized at the national level.

Four main political groupings -- Karzai's camp, the National Front of Afghanistan (NFA), the National Coalition of Afghanistan (NCA), and the Truth and Justice Party (TJP) -- are currently dominating the Afghan political scene (See Appendix for more details on key figures and positions of the four groups).

- Karzai's camp is currently the dominant group but is a tenuous alliance of convenience among elements of former anti-Taliban forces, Hezb-e Islami (HI), and the Pashtun nationalist Afghan Mellat Party (AMP).\(^a\)

- The NFA was launched in November 2011 by former Karzai allies who now oppose many of his policies. It features some prominent anti-Taliban figures, including Hazara leader Mohammad Mohaqeq, Uzbek leader Abdul Rashid Dostum, and former Vice President Ahmad Zia Massoud (*Daily Afghanistan*, 12 November 2011).\(^1\)

- The NCA was created in December 2011 as a successor to the Coalition for Change and Hope and is led by former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah and former parliament speaker Mohammad Yunus Qanuni. Like NFA, it opposes Karzai and features some prominent anti-Taliban leaders (Bokhdinews, 22 December 2011).\(^2\)

- The TJP was launched in early November 2011 by a number of former cabinet ministers and lawmakers who lost their seats in the 2010 parliamentary elections, including former Minister of Rural Development Mohammad Ihsan Zia and former Interior Minister Mohammad Hanif Atmar. It is the weakest of the four main groupings and does not oppose Karzai's policies as strongly as the NFA or NCA. (Pajhwok Afghan News, 3 November 2011; Kabulpress, 20 November 2011).\(^3\) \(^4\) \(^5\) \(^6\) \(^7\) \(^8\)

In addition, there are a handful of prominent Afghan figures with links to some of these groupings, although currently they do not formally belong to any of them: Balkh Governor

Atta Mohammad Nur, Nangarhar Governor Gol Agha Sherzai, former intelligence chief Amrullah Saleh, Badakhshan MP Fawzia Koofi, Kabul MP Ramazan Bashardost, and Nangarhar MP Abdul Zaher Qadir.

**Shifting Alliances**

The current configuration of major political forces is likely to change, given their internal rivalries and the history of shifting alliances in the past.

- The future of Karzai's camp is uncertain because he is limited to two terms by the Constitution. The unity of the group may depend on whom Karzai eventually backs as presidential candidate, or if he retains power by some other means. So far the media have speculated on his brother Abdul Qayyum Karzai, Minister of Education Farooq Wardak, and First Vice President Mohammad Qasim Fahim as Karzai's possible favorites (*Mandegar Daily*, 4 December 2011; Bokhdinews, 27 December 2011; *Abdullah.af*, 8 January). However, the factionalized nature of the group may make it difficult for any successor to hold the entire group together.

- The unity of the NFA is also tenuous, given the fickleness of its leadership's past alliances. Massoud and Dostum were in fact part of a previous alliance of exactly the same name and agenda, but the alliance disintegrated in the lead-up to the 2009 presidential elections.\(^\text{b}\)

- The NCA has not yet agreed on a candidate for the 2014 presidential elections, which may prove divisive for the group. As runners-up in 2004 and 2009 elections respectively, both Mohammad Yunus Qanuni and Abdullah Abdullah may aspire to the presidency.\(^{12,13}\)

**Impact of Taliban Threat**

The erstwhile anti-Taliban leaders in the NFA and NCA have in recent months expressed alarm -- possibly as a genuine concern but maybe also as a political mobilization strategy -- about the increasing threat of the Taliban within and outside the government as the ISAF withdrawal draws nearer.

- In a 1 April meeting of the NFA leadership in Kabul, Massoud warned that the government is "working toward strengthening the terrorist groups," adding that "senior government leaders are trying to facilitate the penetration of the Taliban into the security forces." In the same meeting Mohaqeq observed that "now the [anti-Taliban] resistance forces have been disarmed, Karzai wants to make peace with the Taliban singlehandedly," adding that the US "made a mistake by announcing a withdrawal timeframe for its forces" (*Jabha-e Melli*, 2 April; Bokhdinews, 1 April).\(^{14,15}\) NFA leaders have made similar remarks on several other occasions in recent months.\(^{16,17,18}\)

Similarly, in a 1 April interview, NCA's Qanuni alleged that "Karzai's thoughts are more inclined toward the Taliban than our lot [anti-Taliban forces]," adding that "individuals with pro-Taliban orientations have more of an impact on the president's mind" (Jomhornews, 1 April). In an address to the youth wing of the NCA on 12 April, Qanuni again warned that in an effort to perpetuate their rule, the government leadership is trying to "facilitate the return of terrorism and the Taliban" (Bostnews, 12 April).

Growing concerns about the Taliban threat and its role in post-2014 Afghanistan may consolidate the political landscape around two political, and possibly even militarized, rival clusters.

- A merger of the NFA and NCA at some point before or during 2014 is possible, given their similar political agendas and common anti-Taliban roots. Both groups have called for parliamentary government and elected governors and are suspicious of reconciliation with the Taliban. The differences between them seem to be mainly of a personal nature at the leadership level. Massoud indicated recently that NFA and NCA would "merge soon" to which Abdullah responded by saying that NCA "have not yet decided on merger with [NFA]" (Bokhdinews, 17, 20 January). NCA might pursue the idea of merger more favorably after Abdullah's rotating leadership ends, since Qanuni has expressed desire for a "grand national umbrella" to confront the looming Taliban threat (Jomhornews, 1 April).

- In an 11 March gathering, former anti-Taliban leaders from a cross-section of the major political clusters, including Karzai's camp, urged unity and even military preparedness among the anti-Taliban forces. Karzai ally MP Abdurrab Rasul Sayyaf said: "Be very careful that we should not be undermined from within under the divisive pretexts of ethnicity, region, and language; we should preserve this united body at any cost." He warned the anti-Taliban forces not to "sit unconcerned about the future; do not be totally oblivious and unaware about today and post-2014 and thereabouts." (Tolonews, 11 March). Massoud suggested that the anti-Taliban forces should revive their "military structures" in anticipation of ISAF withdrawal (Jabha-e Melli, 12 March).

Should the NFA and NCA unify and attract major anti-Taliban leaders among Karzai's allies, the remainder of the Karzai camp may rely increasingly on HI and some level of cooperation even from the Taliban to remain politically relevant.

- In the context of his remarks to deny reports that the insurgent group Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin (HIG) had severed negotiations with the government, HIG chief negotiator Ghairat Bahir effectively endorsed Karzai's leadership by saying that "from our perspective Hamid Karzai is the president of Afghanistan" (Bokhdinews, 29 January).

- Similarly, the Afghan Government's backing of the Taliban's opening of an office in Qatar and the Afghan ambassador to Pakistan's suggestive remarks, in a 3 April interview with UK's Guardian newspaper, that negotiations would lead to the Taliban's participation in presidential elections suggests that at least some in Karzai's camp may
be willing to court the militants to countervail the anti-Taliban forces’ influence
(Hewad, 7 April; Hasht-e Sobh, 8, 9 April). 28, 29, 30, 31

- State-run newspaper Hewad issued a strongly worded editorial against a 5 May 2011
  opposition rally and approvingly quoted a former Taliban leader's denunciatory words,
  perhaps portending the dichotomization of politics along pro- and anti-Taliban lines (7
  May 2011). 32

Limited Options for TJP, Independents

The consolidation of the political landscape around two major political forces would likely
force various TJP and emerging independent figures either to join one of the major groupings
or risk becoming ineffectual at the national level.

- Amrullah Saleh's political career since his resignation in June 2010 as intelligence chief
  is perhaps instructive about the prospects of aspiring independent leaders. For almost a
  year after his resignation, Saleh campaigned as an emerging independent leader. 3 c
  Finally, he organized a huge political rally in Kabul on 5 May 2011, in which Abdullah
  also participated (Tolonews, 5 May 2011). 33, 34 The rally likely provided Abdullah with
  a platform to reaffirm his sagging leadership since 2009 elections, but it also helped
  Saleh gain a semblance of major cluster patronage against Karzai's camp. In recent
  months Saleh has worked with NFA without officially committing to its membership
  (Jabha-e Melli, 1 May). 35, 36

- Other aspiring leaders such as Koofi, Bashardost, Qadir and those affiliated with the
  TJP may also need to either coalesce around the major political clusters or risk being
  pushed into the sidelines of national politics in a possibly dichotomized political
  landscape. 3 d

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* c See the 13 August 2010 OSC Analysis, Afghan Media Treat Former NDS Chief as Karzai Critic
(FEA20100816008341); and the 17 November 2011 OSC Analysis, Afghan Media Provide Broad Coverage of
Former NDS Chief Saleh (SAF20111117643002).

* d Koofi -- the highest female vote winner and among the top ten vote winners overall in the 2010 parliamentary
  elections -- has declared her intention to run in the 2014 presidential elections (The Guardian, 17 February).
  Bashardost was third runner-up behind Karzai and Abdullah in the 2009 elections and he has been a staunch critic
  of both the government and political opposition (See 14 July 2009 OSC Report, Profile of Ramazan Bashardost
  (IAP20090714570001). Deputy parliament speaker Qadir is head of the largest parliamentary bloc, the Coalition
  for the Rule of Law, since June 2011 (Pajhwok, 22 June 2011). Nur and Sherzai have stronger power bases and
  are more likely to be able to retain their influence as independent leaders.
### APPENDIX
Details of Afghan Political Groupings

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<th>GROUPING</th>
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| Karzai Camp                   | • First Vice President Mohammad Qasim Fahim  
• Second Vice President Karim Khalili  
• MP Abdurrab Rasul Sayyaf  
• Energy and Water Minister Mohammad Ismael Khan  
• HI leader and Economy Minister Abdul Hadi Arghandiwal  
• AMP leader and Minister of Commerce and Industries Anwarul Haq Ahadi  
• Education Minister Farooq Wardak | Karzai himself supports the presidential form of government and the president's authority to appoint provincial governors. He is also keen on negotiations with the Taliban and HIG. Other coalition members come from a variety of political traditions with varied views on the above, but appear to go along with official government policy under Karzai's leadership. |
| National Front of Afghanistan (NFA) | • Former Vice President Ahmad Zia Massoud  
• Hazara leader Mohmmad Mohaqeq  
• Uzbek leader Abdul Rashid Dostum | NFA advocates a parliamentary system, elected governors, and decentralization of power. It is critical of government policies on Taliban reconciliation and supports US engagement in Afghanistan. |
| National Coalition of Afghanistan (NCA) | • Former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah  
• Former parliament speaker Mohmmad Yunos Qanuni | NCA advocates a parliamentary system and elected governors. It is critical of government policies on Taliban reconciliation and supports US engagement in Afghanistan. |
| Truth and Justice Party (TJP)  | • Foremer Interior Minister Mohammad Hanif Atmar  
• Former Minister of Rural Development Mohammad Ihsan Zia | TJP has not taken a position on the government structure. It has alleged that the government's peace policy is "non-transparent" and has vowed to work with "people and other likeminded political institutions" toward a "just peace and lasting security." |
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