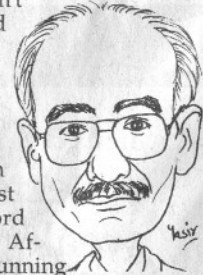


Karzai and the warlords

President Hamid Karzai has dropped Defence Minister and Vice President Mohammad Qasim Fahim, the most powerful warlord from Northern Afghanistan, as a running mate. While filing his nomination papers on Monday, Karzai brought in instead Ahmad Zia Masoud and Karim Khalili for the two vice presidential slots.



The expectations entertained earlier this month by *The New York Times* regarding an alliance of powerful northern political leaders and warlords throwing its weight behind Karzai "making it unlikely that he will face a serious challenge" have turned out to be unfounded.

The gauntlet thrown by Yunus Qanuni, who submitted nomination papers for presidency on Monday, and the support announced for him by Marshal Fahim constitute a serious challenge to Karzai. Fahim's militia controls Kabul, the Tajik areas of northern Afghanistan, and the Panjsher valley. With Abdullah Abdullah, Fahim and Qanuni standing together, the Panjesheri core remains united against Karzai. Will they be able to carry the Tajik community, the second largest after the Pushtuns,

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with them?

Ahmad Zia Masoud has been nominated by Karzai to balance Fahim. He is a younger brother of the charismatic leader Ahmad Shah Masoud who was assassinated in September 2001. He is also the son-in-law of former President Burhanuddin Rabbani, who has his own reasons to be unhappy with the Panjsheri leadership. In a counter move, Qanuni claims to have enlisted the support of Ahmad Wali Masoud, another younger brother of the assassinated Northern Alliance leader. The mantle of Ahmad Shah Masoud thus stands divided.

To win the support of the Hazara community, Karzai has nominated Shiite leader Karim Khalili second vice president on his panel. As the military governor of Bamiyan, Khalili had resisted Dostum's attacks. But with Shiite commander Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq also in the fray, the community will not cast vote as a bloc for Karzai. Uzbek warlord Abdur Rashid Dostum who earlier resigned as adviser to the President has also decided to contest. The Northern Alliance is thus divided.

A few weeks back Karzai had observed that private militias had become the country's greatest danger - greater than the Taliban insurgency - and that new action was required to disarm them. A major reason to post-

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pone the October 9 presidential election twice was the failure to disarm the militias. As Karzai put it, "Without disarmament, Afghan state will have really serious difficulties." Recent attempts to dissolve armed bands have only met with partial success. Out of the estimated 60,000 private gunmen only 10,360 have so far been disarmed.

With the private militias in place and set against any attempt to deprive them of their weapons which give them power, they are likely to influence the course of the elections. With Fahim continuing as Senior Vice President and Defence Minister, they could harass voters suspected of sympathies for Karzai.

They could resort to strong arm tactics during polls or stuff the ballot boxes. In case the elections still go against them, they could resort to armed resistance. Indications of a break between Karzai and Fahim last

week had caused considerable tension in Kabul. As Fahim called his commanders for a conference, the embassies and the NGOs advised their staff to limit their movements in the city.

What may subdue the warlords in the North is the attitude of the US and other western governments. Mr Karzai who has tried to win over rather than confront the warlords was encouraged by his foreign backers to drop Fahim from his team. The hint thrown by Khalilzad on Tuesday is not going to be missed by the warlords.

Asked if the US would intervene if the militias caused trouble, the US ambassador said Fahim had a "direct responsibility" for preventing violence. "We expect everyone to do everything they can not to undermine stability here. Political competition is good, it is fine. That's the way for the future in Afghanistan. But the use of force to resolve political disputes is a thing of the past."

The US has 20,000 troops in Afghanistan and an effective air power. The warlords, however, know that with Taliban still on the rampage Washington would be reluctant to open another front. They would therefore do all they can short of open defiance to get their candidate elected. What is more, as with the exception of Konar the Taliban do not have effec-

tive presence in northern Afghanistan, voter turn out in the region is going to be larger than in the south. The Tajik provinces could spring a surprise on Karzai.

In the Pushtun region Mr Karzai will be pestered by the Taliban who have opposed the registration of voters and have at places used force to stop it. They would like the population to boycott the polls wherever they can through propaganda combined with intimidation. Even where the religious militia has no effective presence many Pushtuns who have suffered on account of the US led allied military action are likely to abstain in protest. In view of the Pushtun tribal traditions fewer women would exercise their choice. More votes cast in the north and less in the south do not augur well for Mr Karzai.

With the US help Karzai may win the election. What is more, he may hopefully have a supportive parliament in spring next year. The struggle against warlords will however only partially succeed but not end with the sidelining of Marshal Fahim. Fighting simultaneously on two fronts, the Taliban and the warlords, is going to be an uphill task. Karzai had been soft on the later during most of his tenure drawing flak from women organisations and liberals. Will he again revert to his earlier approach once the elections are over?

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