

Afghanistan Facing Ethnic Division?

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The "Balkanisation" of Afghanistan is now a distinct possibility, as Afghan opposition commanders take charge of their old fiefdoms.

The United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, UIFSA, also known as the Northern Alliance or United Front, has trebled its share of the country in just a week.

The group's speed and agility has stunned Washington, London and much of the world. Until last Friday, UIFSA controlled just ten per cent of Afghanistan, small slivers of territory in the north-east of the country.

However, as welcoming statements from Bush and Blair greet the Northern Alliance advance into Kabul, a new set of problems may well emerge.

Until Tuesday, the UIFSA had liberated areas, which contained the ethnic groups from which their force were drawn.

For example, veteran Afghan and UIFSA commander, General Abdul Rashid Dostum, is an Uzbek. On Saturday night, he led an army of Uzbeks into a largely Uzbek city of Mazir-e-Sharif. Dostum was the quasi president of Samangan, the predominantly Uzbek province, of which Mazir-e-Sharif is the capital, before its occupation by the Taleban. His portrait was displayed prominently around the city.

As events unfolded on Sunday, Dostum's forces moved westwards, down the road to Shibergan and eventually to the western Shia city of Herat, where they were joined by forces loyal to Ismail Khan. Khan is a Hazara, he leads a force of ethnic Hazara Shias and enjoys widespread support in Afghanistan's western Shia regions. It is little surprise that Khan's troops joined with Dostum's in the liberation of Herat.

However, the liberation of Kabul on Tuesday poses new problems. The UIFSA is noticeably deficient of Pashtuns, which make up the core of the Taleban's Afghan troops. For now, Pashtun Kabul is welcoming the predominantly Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara UIFSA as liberators. The city has finally thrown off its oppressive yoke of religious police, edicts, and gender exclusion. Speculation inevitably now focuses on the city's future. How long can the UIFSA hope to maintain order in a city in which it is an ethnic minority? Will Kabul simply sit back and accept governance from the UIFSA? This problem could be worsened by Kabul's memories of the horrendous human rights abuses, devastation and lawlessness that characterised the UIFSA's previous administration of the city.

A possible crisis in legitimacy for the UIFSA could be intensified if they decide to occupy areas around Jalalabad and Kandahar, which are almost totally Pashtun and which are also the Taleban's heartland. While reports Tuesday evening from the UIFSA's interior minister Yonus Qanuni stress that there is an anti-Taleban uprising in Jalalabad, this does not guarantee that the city, halfway between Kabul and the eastern Afghan-Pakistan border, will welcome the UIFSA with open arms.

But another greater danger is the development of splits within the UIFSA itself - which could lead to the ethnic fragmentation of Afghanistan. If a post-Taleban settlement fails to work and the UIFSA divide, it could effectively leave some commanders in charge of the same areas they controlled before the Taleban appeared. The UIFSA's record on cohesion and unity leaves much to be desired. Their fragmentation is a very real possibility. Should the Taleban and dissident UIFSA elements retain their respective heartlands, a "Balkanisation" of Afghanistan may occur.

By allowing the UIFSA command of the ground, Washington and London have allowed them a carte-blanche to advance at their convenience. A ground force of British and American troops could prevent this, however the leaders of both countries have yet to work out full details of deployment, and as time goes on, UIFSA's consolidation of the country can only continue.

This could make any insertion of a multi-national force difficult, as UIFSA are reluctant to allow more foreign troops into the country, and the US is unlikely to want to maintain a forward presence in Afghanistan for too long.

Would victorious UIFSA commanders be happy to relinquish control of their areas if required to by any internationally negotiated, post-Taleban political arrangement? Would they be willing to rescind control of their areas to elements from different ethnic groups, or even more moderate elements within the Taleban? Where would the loyalty of their troops lie in such an event? Even if a commander was to agree, would his soldiers follow suit?

Secondly, the UIFSA entered Kabul despite pleas from Washington, London and Pakistan to hold back and wait for a political framework, possibly involving the former king, Zahir Shah, to be in place. UIFSA commanders speaking on Tuesday morning mentioned that they had specific orders forbidding them from entering the city, but by nightfall, Kabul was in UIFSA hands.

Given that UIFSA has made more gains in the past five days than in the past five years, is it realistic for Washington and London to expect this force of battle-hardened troops to refrain from sustaining their advance? Also, the UIFSA's failure to heed Washington and London's requests may result in the allies being unable to exercise substantial leverage on the UIFSA if their territorial gains continue.

The Balkanisation of Afghanistan is now a distinct possibility, as UIFSA commanders take charge of their old fiefdoms. This process could be hastened if the coalition undergoes any fragmentation.

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