

Concern Over Tajik 'Control' of New Army

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There are growing fears that the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance is aiming to monopolise the country's fledgling national army.

The depth of the Northern Alliance's influence over the national armed forces taking shape in Afghanistan became clear when interim defence minister Mohammad Qaseem Fahim introduced his new commanders.

The appointees, presented at a seminar in mid-March called to discuss the make-up of the new force, were nearly all militia leaders in the anti-Taliban coalition, several of whom were notorious for their brutality against civilians and disrespect for the laws of war.

Among the Pashtun majority, hostile to the dominant hold of Tajiks and other ethnic minorities over the alliance, many see the new military commanders as little better than terrorists.

"How would Americans feel if the terrorists of September 11 became their state governors and generals overnight?" demanded one Kabul citizen, who gave his name as Kamaluddin. "They would hate it. Why do they then allow it to be inflicted on us?"

The old national army was more or less broken up by the Northern Alliance itself before the Taliban rolled it back to seize Kabul and other major cities in 1996.

Since the defeat of the student militia last year, the US NGO Human Rights Watch reports that the military forces of the Northern Alliance, once more in the ascendant, have been responsible for a string of murders, beatings, sexual violence and ethnic cleansing in areas where they were supposedly charged with maintaining security.

HRW identified the military factions of government parties, the Uzbek Junbish Millis Islami, the Tajik Jamiat-e-Islami and the Hazara Hizb-e-Wahdat, among those behind the attacks. It is the commanders of these factions whose presence at the recent seminar caused such dismay.

It is accepted almost everywhere else in the country that security and a non-partisan national force to guarantee it are essential prerequisites to peace in Afghanistan, yet as Kamaluddin dryly put it, "a cat is being hired to guard the meat".

Among the crowds of people seeking appointments with defence ministry officials earlier in April was former Afghan army colonel Abdul Hanan, who told IWPR about his frustrating return to the services. "After the fall of the Taliban I came back from Pakistan optimistic that duties in the new army would be given to the qualified and deserving," he said. "But I was wrong."

He waited two months for a posting. When he got it, it was not as a colonel, but as a sergeant, not even as an officer. To add insult to injury, he had to pull strings to secure even this minor rank.

"Over the past few months I saw only prejudice and spite. My friends advised me to get a letter of recommendation from a Jihadi (Northern Alliance commander) so I got a letter from Abdul Rasool Sayaf, the influential leader of the Itihad Islami Afghanistan party. There were vacant posts, but only for their

favourites," he said.

The Northern Alliance commanders make little secret of their wish to secure control of the army, or failing that, to ensure that their individual militias - not the new national army - control their respective fiefdoms.

One top alliance commander, Mohammad Ismael Khan, the governor of Herat, says outright that membership of the army should be limited to alliance forces.

Captain Mohammad Hashim, the administrator of Kabul military college, is critical of such demands, "After the fall of Dr Najibullah (the post-Soviet Afghan communist leader) the army was turned over to these same Jihadi. They simply destroyed it, smashed it and looted its weaponry."

A new army under their command would fare no better, he argued, "The national army should be cleared of such persons. They foster prejudice, factionalism and destroy professionalism. The cubs of wolves remain wolves even when raised by men."

He is an ardent supporter of conventional western professional armies, commanded by well-trained, well-equipped volunteer officers. His future students should be "devoid of racism, politics and nationalism, and be intelligent, patriotic members of society".

The model for such a force is already in uniform in the shape of a battalion of 600 men, recently passed out from a western-run training camp. The plan is to take in 20 volunteers from each of the country's different provinces to guarantee an ethnic mix and only recruit them once they pass basic training satisfactorily.

All are expected to be fully literate, numerate. Trained by 160 foreign soldiers, some of the graduates can eventually expect further training in the US and Britain.

However, Captain Hashim said he was aware that this process might still be open to abuse by militia leaders in the provinces, who would simply push forward their favourites.

The first of the new battalions was turned out on January 14 under the inspecting eye of interim president Hamid Karzai. He also put great store by the independence and discipline of the new force. "I observe a new national army growing out of the destruction of the old one," he told the men. "I believe that you, young soldiers, will be devoted in rendering services to your country and people."

Much will depend on whether western military forces expand their present limited support for training and supplant the old amalgam of Turkish and Russian military systems that used to define the old Afghan national army.

A military delegation under British Major General Charles Campbell recently visited Kabul to assess how such a national army could be treated and how it might strengthen the interim government.

Lt-Colonel Shawar Gul, a senior member of the fledgling army, looks to Washington for support, noting the success of the American system in ranking and structuring the new elite battalion. The US Secretary of State for Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, has already said Washington intends to "put its effort and time and money into creating (an army) that lives there and is going to stay there".

But also needed, says Lt-Colonel Gul, are the modern weapons and communications systems that will give them the ability to put their training into place when the need arises.

Defence minister Fahim's right-hand man and spokesperson, Brigadier-General Gul Aqa, felt there were many fundamental questions yet to be answered before a national army could become a reality.

"We have a lot of problems to solve," he told IWPR. "Problems with recruiting, the need for a draft, the age and educational requirements of the troops, how to define the order of battle, dividing forces into brigades and battalions and so on, never mind the question of breaking up the old brigades and absorbing their men."

They were, he said, working within a system without shape or order, "Even the salaries of the defence minister's staff are not yet being paid." He believed that the army should have standards. It was "just that those standards have not been set yet".

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Location: Pakistan
Afghanistan

Focus: Afghanistan

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/concern-over-tajik-control-new-army>