

Dostum Proposes Federalisation

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Uzbek general pushes federalisation plan that could lead to partition

Uzbek commander Abdul Rashid Dostum has proposed a federal government for Afghanistan in what is seen as a bid to consolidate his power-base in the north of the country.

The newly released draft programme of Dostum's National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan, NIMA, a coalition partner in the ruling United Front, based mainly in the country's north-eastern provinces, presses for a devolved administration.

NIMA, made up predominantly of Uzbeks, was widely perceived to have been snubbed at last year's Bonn conference which saw the formation of an interim government of ethnic-based factions after the fall of the Pashtun-dominated Taleban regime.

Many of the key posts in the new authority headed by Hamid Karzai - a Pashtun - were handed to ethnic Tajik representatives. Only later was Dostum appointed deputy defence minister and representative for the north of the country.

Now, with only two months to go before June's Loya Jirga to decide the final shape of the administration, observers say that Dostum's latest plan is an attempt to solidify his power-base in the north, staking his claim amid continuing national and international debate on Afghanistan's future.

It could also signal his future designs on wider power - including eventual partition of Afghanistan along ethnic lines.

Dostum's manoeuvring highlights the interim administration's tenuous hold on power. The authority is made up of many Northern Alliance representatives who, while they had their differences, pulled together to overthrow the Taleban. Now the fighting is over, their old rivalries are surfacing, prompting some observers to speculate that some form of ethnic division, in the form of federalization or regional autonomy, is inevitable.

Indeed, such a multiplicity of interests saw the US secretary of state Colin Powell openly raise the prospect of a federal form of government when visiting the region last year.

But Dr Habib Mangal, a former Afghan ambassador to Moscow under the pro-Soviet regime, believes federalism could actually create more problems than it solves, as ethnic groups are by no means united nor evenly distributed across the country.

While accepting the need for some sort of elected local or regional government, Mangal says that only the "deepening of democracy, economic and social developments of the country can guarantee the right of nationalities to the political power".

However, Basheer Azizi, an ethnic Tajik political activist, now working as a teacher in The Netherlands, believes that recognising each ethnic group's history, culture, traditions and language is vital to stability.

"It used to be the case that power was monopolised by the centre and it was the centre that determined the destiny of the countryside, now the opposite should be the case," he said.

Whatever system - federal or non-federal - is chosen, Azizi says the full participation of all the nationalities of Afghanistan in the running of the state affairs must be ensured, "What makes a difference is that we should not return to the single nationality rule

and the will of one nationality over others (which has dominated Afghan politics for the last thirty years)."

Demarcating ethnic groups into different provinces would be one of the first difficulties a federal system would face.

For example, in the five provinces controlled by the NIMA (Balkh, Saripul, Jawzejan, Fariab, Samangan) in the north there are Uzbeks, Hazaras, Tajiks and a minority of Pashtuns, who are unevenly distributed here and in the west of country, as a result of their forced migration from eastern and southern strongholds in the early part of the twentieth century.

The Indian example also shows that territorial delineation can lead to conflict over resources, with the states of Punjab and Haryana in dispute for years over distribution of the waters of the Bayas and Ravi rivers.

Dostum is a controversial figure who last year recaptured the strategic town of Mazar-e-Sharif - a vital turning point in the battle against the fundamentalist regime - and occupied it for the most part peacefully, despite fears of a repeat of the alleged atrocities committed by his troops in Kabul in the mid-1990s.

Although disappointed at last year's Bonn talks, he promoted reconciliation, saying, "the division of power will not now go on by means of force." But many fear that if he doesn't get his way it will.

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