

Haji Mohammad Mohaqeq: Hazara Leader Dogged by Brutality Claims

Author: [Danish Karokhel](#)

Haji Mohammad Mohaqeq is a prominent politician but will have to work hard to live down his past role in factional strife.

Haji Mohammad Mohaqeq, who served as Karzai's planning minister until his recent dismissal, promised to wage a vigorous, nationwide campaign despite alleged threats to his life.

A well-known commander who resisted the Taleban in the late Nineties, Mohaqeq, 47, is a key leader of Hizb-e-Wahdat, the main faction of the Hazara ethnic minority, who live mostly in central Afghanistan and unlike most Afghans are Shia Muslims.

If Mohaqeq hopes to attract voters beyond his ethnic following, he will first have to refute allegations about the role he played as a Hizb-e-Wahdat commander during the incessant fighting between various Afghan factions in Kabul in the first half of the Nineties - including accusations that his troops used particularly brutal techniques to kill prisoners.

The Kabul daily newspaper Farda recently published a cartoon showing Mohaqeq at a podium saying that if elected, he would not only bring democracy to the country but also restore such practices as "making the dead dance" and "nailing". The cartoon is a reference to the "dance of the dead", where enemy soldiers were decapitated and their necks sealed up so that their headless bodies moved about while still standing. "Nailing" involved pinning enemy combatants to a wall using nails.

Both practices were reportedly a speciality of Hizb-e-Wahdat troops, although other factions such as Jamiat-e-Islami and General Abdul Rashid Dostum's forces have also been accused of great brutality during the years of fighting in the capital.

Mohaqeq says the cartoon is an insult to the Hazara people, and an example of the ethnic hatred directed against them. "It is against all the Hazara," he said. "They only [used] me as symbol," he said, denying that he had any part in atrocities.

During a press conference early last month, Mohaqeq said he was not responsible for the deaths of thousands of people in the Karte-i-Say district of Kabul, who died between 1992 and 1996. His denial came despite a widely-viewed video documentary made when he was commander of the Hizb-e-Wahdat forces that controlled the district at the time.

"It is possible to take a photo of anyone and do whatever you want," said Mohaqeq, adding that he was not in Kabul at the time of the killings. "I wasn't a commander and actually I wasn't in Kabul. I was in Mazar-e-Sharif," he said.

Mohaqeq admitted to maintaining a personal militia of several thousand fighters, but said that most of the troops once under his command are now part of the Afghan National Army.

Born into a farming family in the Charkent district of Balkh province in northern Afghanistan, Mohaqeq studied at a madrassa or religious school in Mazar-e-Sharif.

In 1978, he joined the mujahedin resistance against the Communist government and became a leading figure among Hazara in his home region, northern Afghanistan, rather than in the central mountains generally viewed as the Hazara heartland. He later became a leading member of Hizb-e-Wahdat, set up in the late Eighties to unify a range of Hazara groups.

When the mujahedin captured Kabul in 1992, the factions soon turned on one another, Mohaqeq took part in various alliances, often aligned with General Dostum and his largely Uzbek forces.

He served as interior minister in Burhanuddin Rabbani's government which controlled the northern half of Afghanistan until it eventually fell to the Taleban. When Kabul fell in 1996, Mohaqeq remained in Mazar-e-Sharif until that too was captured, and then continued to attack the Taleban from mountain bases at Balkhab and Dara-i-Soof.

Mohaqeq was appointed planning minister in the cabinet approved by the Bonn meeting in December 2001. He contends that his recent dismissal was illegal, that he still considers himself planning minister, and that the United Nations and the United States should pressure Karzai to restore him to the post. A demonstration last month in Mazar calling for his reinstatement drew about 2,000 people.

Mohaqeq said that he had received three death threats since announcing his candidacy.

When asked whether he thought the presidential campaign would be fair, Mohaqeq said that the United Nations monitoring of the election process was essential if candidates were to be afforded equal opportunities. He also noted that voter registration efforts continue to lag and that security remains a major problem in much of the country.

Mohaqeq has faulted Karzai for a weak management style and for failing to exert control over his ministers. He also accused the president of failing to control the cultivation and trafficking of narcotics in border areas and in the Pashtun south.

He promised that, if elected, he would fight against drug smuggling, restore a sense of national confidence and negotiate an end to fighting between various ethnic groups.

Although Mohaqeq has a large following, few observers believe he will attract sufficient support to be elected.

Mohammad Mosa Marofi, a law professor at Kabul university and a former member of the constitutional commission, said most people are unable to forget Mohaqeq's bloody past.

"His supporters are a minority and... are tribally divided," said Marofi, suggesting that Mohaqeq may not win the entire Hazara vote.

Sayed Noorullah Rahmati, director of the Meher Cultural Organisation and a representative to the recent Constitutional Loya Jirga, thinks the only way Mohaqeq could defeat Karzai is if he gets backing from the international community.

Dr Hossein Yasa, spokesman for Mohaqeq, promised to wage an aggressive presidential campaign. "We

plan meetings in villages, and on the streets, with other [ethnic groups], and to send representatives to eight regions," he said.

For his part, Mohaqeq continues to deny involvement in the war crimes of the early Nineties, and insists that he is qualified to stand.

"We are all Muslim and born from Muslim families," he said. "No court has condemned me yet."

Danish Karokhel is a trainer/editor with IWPR in Kabul.

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