

Karzai May Struggle to Disarm Warlords

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Political rivalries, economics and tradition stand in the way of any Afghan disarmament process.

If Afghanistan is to have any chance of achieving a long-lasting peace, the various tribal and ethnic factions in the country need to be disarmed. "The rule of the gun is the main obstacle to establishing peace," the Afghan prime minister Hamid Karzai said last week.

It is generally agreed that the current provisional government has to bring all the various armed groupings under the umbrella of the defence ministry. The process began last week in the north-east of the country with officials overseeing the registration and collection of a number of small weapons.

The Afghan interior minister, Younis Qanooni, told IWPR that the government had representatives in all parts of the country ready to start disarmament. A police force of 30,000 was also being recruited and would be integral in the move.

Qanooni said there had been no opposition to the idea of handing in weapons so far and fighters were already off the streets and in their barracks.

However, skirmishing around the northern stronghold of Mazar-e-Sharif and the reappearance of armed men on the streets of Kabul last week suggest that Qanooni's view may be somewhat optimistic.

After more than two decades of conflict, many warlords and tribal leaders are reluctant to lay down their arms and the task of hauling in the estimated million weapons in the country will be a difficult one. People have grown used to living by the gun and simply calling for a weapons amnesty is unlikely to have much impact.

Although there is peace for the time being, several factions are unhappy with their representation in parliament. International observers fear that force will once again be used as a means of gaining more power. Memories of 1992, when mujahedin groups started fighting each other, launching the country on a fresh path of destruction, are fresh in people's minds.

It is feared that several senior Northern Alliance leaders will ignore pleas to disarm. General Abdul Rashid Dostum in Mazar-e-Sharif, Ismail Khan in Herat, Mohammed Muhaqiq and others, unhappy not to have been given key positions in the government, might retreat into their heavily-armed fiefdoms.

Without their participation in the disarmament process, it is inconceivable that a government of national unity can take power or reconstruction of the country begin. Dostum, Khan and Muhaqiq believe that since Pashtun domination of other ethnic groupings in the country has long been the source of trouble in the country, this is the time to rectify the problem.

General Atiqullah Baryalai, deputy defence minister in charge of north-eastern Afghanistan, said that disarmament is a matter of political will and knows that securing the support of the major commanders is essential.

Another reason why the process might falter is simple economic reality. An overwhelming number of

fighters joined up with various armed groups over the years in order to provide for their families.

The country's economy was already in a fairly dire state before the soviet invasion of 1979 devastated the country. Now that the infrastructure has been virtually destroyed, the armed factions will continue to serve as a source of employment for some time to come.

Then there is the problem that bearing arms is a matter of tradition among the Pashtun tribes in the south and east of Afghanistan. Any notion of forced disarmament is a hard one to countenance, especially now that thousands of Taleban fighters who melted into these areas are feeling vulnerable with their conquerors in control.

Even when these problems have been faced, the question arises as to how the collection of weapons will actually be carried out. While General Bayalai may have had limited success in disarming some of the more war weary veterans in villages in the north-east, deep-seated suspicions between rival groups there suggests that this approach is not going to work.

Some believe the best way forward is to scale down the militias and accommodate them under the defence ministry as part of a national army. This makes sense in principle, but loyalties in Afghanistan are based on tribal rather than national ties.

All parties are looking at the six-month term of the provisional government as a probationary period and are waiting to see what happens next. The follow-on stage of the process is the setting up of the Loyah Jirgah - the parliamentary assembly which will convene in the middle of next year.

If the various parties are satisfied with the allocation of power, then the disarming the various factions will be easier. But two decades of war will not be quickly forgotten and neither will the fact that Afghanistan has too long a history of solving political disputes with the gun.

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