

Karzai Unveils Cabinet - At Last

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After days of rumour and intrigue, Hamid Karzai finally announces his cabinet, with appointments drawing broad support from Loya Jirga delegates.

President-elect Hamid Karzai announced a cabinet on Wednesday that's kept the delicate balance between the country's two largest groups, the Pashtuns and the Tajiks.

Towards the end of a masterful 45-minute speech, he asked the delegates to the Loya Jirga to approve his choice with a show of hands. When delegates raised their hands, he declared that the main ministerial appointments had been formally approved in accordance with the rules laid down for the assembly by the Bonn conference.

"I think you know what's been going on with me," he joked as he settled in at the podium, an apparent reference to the difficulty he 's thought to have faced in appointing a government acceptable to the delegates. "May God never put you in such a position. I have had big problems."

Of the four key government posts, Mohammad Fahim, the leading military commander from the Northern Alliance who took Kabul when the Taleban fell, remains minister of defence, as expected. He also becomes one of three vice-presidents. Replacing Yunus Qanooni as interior minister is Taj Mohammad Khan Wardak, a provincial governor. Abdullah Abdullah retains the foreign ministry and Ashraf Ghani was handed the department of finance and economics.

The appointments mean that the power ministries are now divided equally between Tajiks and Pashtuns. In the interim administration, the former controlled three of the departments, the latter one.

"A Tajik who is not also a Pashtun is not a Tajik. A Pashtun who is not also a Tajik is not a Pashtun," said Karzai, who spent 20 minutes talking about the need for national unity before announcing his cabinet. As he has done throughout his seven speeches to the assembly, he spoke mainly in Dari but repeated key portions in Pashto.

Karzai's two other vice-president appointments were men with immense sway over their respective regions - Haji Qadeer and Karim Khalili from the eastern and central part of the country respectively - and then told them they had to stay in Kabul.

"Haji Qadeer, where are you?" he said, scanning the audience with the humour that has become a trademark of his public speaking. "You heard you must stay in Kabul."

Qadeer is the governor of Nangahar province and has had the backing of 148 delegates throughout the conference, about the only leader able to command such a block vote. Khalili is head of Hezb-e-Wahdat party and political leader of Afghanistan's Hazara community.

"We have appointed these people because we want to maintain national unity," Karzai said.

The president-elect also made UN special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi an honorary Afghan citizen and awarded a medal to US envoy Zalmay Khalilzad.

Karzai did not announce his full cabinet, only 14 posts. Of these one was a woman, Suheila Siddiq, who retains her post as minister of health in the interim administration. There was little radical change. Only four of the ministers in the former authority were left without any portfolio.

Karzai also addressed Rashid Dostum and Ismail Khan, Afghanistan's two most powerful regional military leaders. He said the former, who holds sway over large parts of the north, had come to him earlier in the day promising to cease any involvement in military affairs. Karzai said he was trying to work out an arrangement for the latter, the governor of Herat and head of his own force of 30,000 men in the west, to come to Kabul in some position.

The Loya Jirga's approval was technically by a show of hands. Half an hour into his speech, Karzai said, "I want you to raise your hands if you approve my choice."

Many delegates obliged. And after about five seconds, Karzai, who had remained at the podium the whole time, declared that his choice had been approved. There was no separate call for people who did not agree with the appointments.

On the question of a parliament or Shura, Karzai said five delegates from each of the nine regional zones that sent representatives to the gathering should stay in Kabul for a month and sort out details of an assembly to oversee the transitional government over the next 18 months.

Many delegates had said before Karzai's speech that they would be disappointed if the Jirga did not itself create a parliament.

After Karzai finished speaking, Ismail Qassimyar read out a brief speech on behalf of ex-king Zahir Shah. He then adjourned the gathering, despite protests from some delegates who wanted to have their say on the appointments.

The Jirga is expected to meet later on Wednesday for a ceremonial closure.

The full announcements Karzai made were as follows (comparison with interim administration in brackets).

Ministers:

Mohammad Fahim, Defence (no change);
Taj Mohammad Khan Wardak, Interior (replaces Yunus Qanooni);
Abdullah Abdullah, Foreign Affairs (no change);
Ashraf Ghani, Economy and Finance (replaces Hedayat Amin Arsala);
Aji Mohammad Mohaqiq, Planning (no change);
Masoum Stanakzai, Communications (replaces Abdul Rahim);
Mohammad Khan Noorzai, Frontier Areas (replaces Amanullah Zadran);
Alim Razim, Light Industry (replaces Mohammad Khan Noorzai);
Enyatullah Naziri, Migration (no change);
Joma Mohammad Mohammedi, Mines and Heavy Industry (replaces Alim Razim);
Suheila Siddiq, Health (no change);
Mustafa Kazimi, Trade (no change);
Sayid Hussain Anwari, Agriculture (no change);
Yunus Qanooni, Education (replaces Rasoul Amin).

Vice-presidents:

Mohammad Fahim, Karim Khalili, Haji Qadeer.

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