

Nangarhar Dispute Threatens to Escalate

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A behind the scenes battle for authority in the Nangarhar region poses a potentially serious threat to hopes of securing a united Afghanistan.

A potentially damaging challenge to the interim government's authority has arisen out of a long-running power sharing dispute between two Northern Alliance faction leaders in the eastern province of Nangarhar.

Haji Zaman is threatening military action to unseat regional police chief Hazrat Ali, who he says has usurped his position as military commander of Nangarhar, by setting up a base outside Jalalabad, the main town in the area, with 15,000 armed men.

What makes the dispute particularly divisive, Zaman has told IWPR, is that Ali has the covert backing of Northern Alliance commander and current defence minister Mohd Qaseem Fahim in the dispute, effectively defying the wishes of Afghan leader Hamid Karzai.

A senior spokesman for Ali says Karzai must take charge and choose a military commander for Nangarhar - but intimated that the choice should not be Zaman.

Ali and Zaman were quickly embroiled in the dispute over who should take the respective commands of the military and the police in Nangarhar soon after the fall of the Taliban.

In the absence of the province's historic strongman, Fazl Haq, killed in a Taliban ambush in the early days of the US-led campaign in Afghanistan, the two disputed ownership of the twin titles, Qole-Urdu (military commander) and Qomandani Amnia (police chief).

Ali claimed both titles on the grounds that he had remained to fight the Taliban while other leaders had escaped to Pakistan; Zaman laid claim to Qole-Urdu as the successor to Fazl Haq.

Four days of argument followed in the impromptu power-sharing council convened after the Taliban's fall before agreement was imposed. Ali settled for police chief and Zaman took the military command. But that wasn't the end of their enmity.

According to Zaman, interviewed by IWPR last week, Ali, a far more significant figure in the Northern Alliance than he, especially in Nangarhar, continued to lobby for the military rank, persuading Fahim to intervene on his behalf.

Fahim summoned Zaman to Kabul in early February, then detained him when he got there. Ali's deputy Gul Karim then publicly accused Zaman of helping Osama bin Laden evade US forces as they attacked his mountain redoubt in the Tora Bora range.

Zaman rejected the charges and was eventually freed after 15 days thanks to the intervention of the Nangarhar provincial assembly chief Haji Qadeer. After his release, he headed off to see Karzai, who ordered Ali to hand back command of the Nangarhar military, which he had assumed in Zaman's enforced absence.

But Ali has apparently defied this order. According to Zaman, his rival has placed 15,000 men in effective command of Nangarhar, backed with money and weapons from Fahim. He also alleges a Russian plot to set Afghan minorities, such as Ali's Nouristan community, against the Pashtun majority by arming and funding them.

Zaman says Ali's brigade of men is based up in Dara-e-Noor, one of Nangarhar's 21 districts, and home to 15 per cent of the province's population. "Haji Hazrat Ali has 15,000 armed men paid for by General Fahim," he said, "yet (the interim government has) no money to pay government employees in Nangarhar."

And Zaman deepened the war of words by issuing a warning. "I don't want to destroy the peaceful environment of Nangarhar, but if necessary I have the capacity to take out Hazrat Ali, as I have the overall support of the tribesmen (of Nangarhar)," he said.

A senior Fahim spokesman declined to comment in detail about Zaman's charges, and would not be drawn on how the dispute should be resolved. He said it was up to Karzai to appoint a regional military commander, but implied that the post should not go to Zaman.

Walid Baidar is a pseudonym for a Jalalabad-based journalist.

Location: Pakistan
Afghanistan

Focus: Central Asia

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/nangarhar-dispute-threatens-escalate>