

New Job for Sacked Afghan Minister

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President's choice of cabinet members looks tired, and does not suggest a will to deliver on pledge of fresh start.

Two months after Afghanistan's parliament passed a vote of no confidence in two top security ministers, President Hamid Karzai is trying to appoint one of them to take over the other's job.

In early July, legislators called on Interior Minister Bismillah Khan Mohammadi and Defence Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak to step down, after the two had faced mounting accusations that they were failing to counter cross-border attacks from Pakistan.

President Hamid Karzai said he would respect parliament's views and remove both ministers, but asked them to remain temporarily in a caretaker capacity while he found replacements. Wardak refused to do so, and went, but Mohammadi stayed on. (See **Heads Roll as Afghan Parliament Questions Defence Failures.**)

Now the president has nominated Mohammadi to take over the defence ministry.

His name appears on a list of ministers that Karzai has submitted for parliamentary approval. Mujtaba Patang is named as the president's choice to take over the interior ministry, which controls the national police force. Asadullah Khaled, formerly minister for border and tribal affairs, is nominated as head of the National Directorate of Security, to be replaced by Hajji Din Mohammad, formerly governor of Kabul province.

These are all familiar faces, and Karzai's decision simply to reshuffle them has dashed hopes that he might inject some new blood in this round of ministerial appointments. He had, after all, promised a fresh start, better governance and an end to factionalism, corruption and political compromises when he addressed parliament in June, in a speech widely interpreted as a message to the international community ahead of a major donor meeting held in Tokyo in July. (See **Karzai's Anti-Graft Call Gets Lukewarm Response.**)

At a time when international troops are preparing for a final withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014, politicians and commentators say Karzai's list of nominations is unimaginative. They see it as a sign that he would rather continue drawing on a narrow pool of allies to bolster his own position, rather than really strive to make Afghanistan a better-governed place.

One dissenting parliamentarian said the proposed appointments showed how determined Karzai was to keep hold of the reins of power past 2014, when the next presidential election is due.

Ahmad Shah Behzad also suggested that replacing Mohammadi with a more pliable interior minister might make it easier to fix the election. The constitution bars the president from running for a third term, so he will be looking for a successor.

"Karzai wants to nominate his brother Qayum or another friend from his inner circle for the 2014 vote, so he is trying to make some changes so as to be able to interfere in the election," he said.

Another member of parliament, Mohammad Naim Lalai Hamidzai, predicted that the election outcome would also be influenced by neighbours Pakistan and Iran.

"With these changes, Karzai is preparing the ground for his brother and/or other friends to stand," he said. "We also need to take into account the pressures exerted by agents of Iran and Pakistan, which exercise a lot of influence over the Afghan government when such decisions are made."

Political analyst Wahid Mozhdha said ministers who came from outside Karzai's circle and who did not do what he told them tended not to last.

"We may cite ex-interior minister Ali Ahmad Jalali and past finance minister Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai as examples," he said. "They had specialist expertise and they obeyed the law, but because they did not follow Karzai's illegal orders, they could not survive in his cabinet."

Karzai's deputy spokesman Hamed Elmi insisted that the proposed cabinet changes were in the national interest and did not reflect his personal preferences.

"The president has never compromised in his decisions, and these changes have been conceived by reviewing the needs of the current situation in the country," Elmi added.

The National Directorate of Security post became vacant quite unexpectedly, when Karzai dismissed its head Rahmatullah Nabil in late August.

The decision was challenged by parliamentarians who questioned why someone who had proven his effectiveness over the two years he had held the post – and who had only recently been given a top award by the president.

Elmi described Nabil's removal as part of a planned rotation.

"The president has decided that no one can spend more than two years in the position of director of the National Directorate of Security. He was removed because of that policy," he said.

Parliamentarian Sherwali Wardag saw Nabil's departure as a prime example of political interference by neighbouring states.

"Let's not forget that Nabil was among those who effectively fought against foreign intelligence services in the battlefield. Instead of being appreciated, he was removed," he said.

Wardag's colleague Amanullah Paiman added, "It's my understanding that Nabil had some discussions and meetings with colleagues about the future of Afghanistan. If someone from outside Karzai's circle of friends starts political movements, Karzai will not tolerate him because he is afraid of losing power, so he moves against them. Nabil was one such victim."

The choice of Asadullah Khaled to take over the intelligence service was if anything even more controversial. The New York-based advocacy group Human Rights Watch urged Karzai not to appoint him, alleging that he ran a personal prison when he was governor of Kandahar.

Khaled denied these and other allegations levelled against him, saying, "There are certain institutions and individuals that make accusations without furnishing any evidence, and try to destroy people's reputations."

It remains to be seen how the Afghan parliament will respond to Karzai's choices, especially his plan to recycle Mohammadi despite the vote of no confidence.

Speaking in confidence, a number of legislators told IWPR that they had been told they must approve the ministers, otherwise Karzai would just install them in an acting capacity and keep them in post till the end of his term.

"Karzai wants to take parliament hostage in a new way. We've received a message from the presidential office saying we should vote for the individuals nominated, or else the president will appoint them as acting ministers," one legislator said on condition of anonymity. "Not only does the president not respect the laws of the land, he has no respect for any institution, either. Through such arbitrary actions over the years, he has sunk both himself and the country in crisis."

This level of hostility is also felt by many Afghans to whom IWPR has spoken.

"Karzai and his team are a 'gift' that the Americans have burdened Afghans with over the last 11 years," Kabul schoolteacher Silay said. "We kindly request the Americans to remove their gift from our shoulders. We cannot complain about what Karzai is doing since he has already shown his colours.... He has never told the people the truth, nor has he ever betrayed his warlord friends. He has always served the warlords rather than the people."

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