

Northern Alliance Seeks Tajik Backing

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Tajik and Uzbek officials in the interim administration in Afghanistan appear to be looking to Dushanbe to bolster their position.

Afghanistan's Northern Alliance is seeking Tajikistan's backing amid fears that upcoming elections may result in the formation of a government hostile to the coalition.

The alliance, which is dominated by ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks and suspicious of the country's Pashtun majority, sent its acting defence minister Muhammad Fahim to Dushanbe on May 25 for talks with the republic's political and military leadership.

The diplomatic manoeuvre took place weeks ahead of the Loya Jirga, a traditional national assembly, which will elect a new government to replace the temporary regime put in place after the overthrow of the Taliban.

Fahim insisted his visit was intended to strengthen political and economic relations between the two neighbouring states and bolster the regional struggle against terrorism, but some have suggested that he was seeking personal backing from the Dushanbe leadership.

During the visit a number of the specific initiatives were discussed, such as the provision of training for around 30 young Afghans a year in Tajik military academies and possible Tajik assistance in the rebuilding of roads and bridges in Afghanistan.

The visit, however, appears to have been dominated by the issue of Afghan security. "There is a threat that terrorist organisations may reappear in Afghanistan if they receive financial support from certain powers," he said, without specifying which powers he meant.

His Tajik counterpart, Sherali Khairullaev, made it clear that militants continued to pose a threat. "We're not finished with terrorism yet," he said. "There are still hotbeds of tension and there is a danger that there may be some provocation or armed conflicts before the Loya Jirga." Indeed, the UN said last week that it was "deeply concerned" at reports that participants in the grand council, to be held on June 10-15, are being intimidated. Eight Afghans associated with the assembly meeting were killed in May, although the UN said there was no evidence that they were involved in the selection of a future government.

The Northern Alliance and Tajikistan apparently fear that the gathering will appoint a head of state may that will side with the Pashtuns against the Tajik and Uzbek minorities. Ethnic rivalry such as this has been a cause of armed conflict in Afghanistan for decades and there is no guarantee that the latest leadership battle will be confined to the political arena.

A worst-case scenario could involve the alliance - which in addition to defence, holds the interior and foreign affairs portfolios in the interim government - taking up arms to maintain its present influence.

This may well explain its recent attempt to shore up support in neighbouring Tajikistan, which provided considerable assistance to the government of former president Burhanuddin Rabbani, a Tajik.

Rabbani and the alliance's late military chief Ahmad Shah Masood were frequent guests in Dushanbe, while Russian and Iranian weapons entered northern Afghanistan through Tajik territory.

Behind Tajikistan stands Moscow, which is equally keen for the Northern Alliance to hold its ground in the political arena in Afghanistan and provide a solid counterbalance to the forces that now look to the United States.

Earlier last month, the Tajik president Imomali Rakhmonov sought to deny claims that Dushanbe might interfere in Afghan politics by buttressing Fahim's position in the country. He also said he considered any attempt to divide the state along ethnic lines, even as part of a federation, unacceptable.

Dushanbe is clearly anxious not to be seen to be backing the Northern Alliance. And for the moment, at least, the latter does not appear to be in any real danger, as it seems the appointment by the Loya Jirga of a head of state hostile to the Tajiks and Uzbeks is unlikely. The current front-runner is the interim leader, Hamid Karzai, who, though a Pashtun, has been sensitive to the concerns of Afghan minorities.

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