

Pashtuns Complain of Exclusion from Power

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Fears are growing that the under-representation in government of the country's biggest ethnic group will lead to a resumption of bloodshed.

Afghanistan's interim government, set up last year, faces a growing number of critics who say it does not represent the country's ethnic make-up, is prone to factional squabbles - especially within the ruling Tajik party - and is deeply corrupt.

The interim government groups a number of ethnic-based factions, many of which have been enemies in the past. It is hard to accommodate all of them, though their unity is crucial for the administration's survival.

Most ordinary people believe the only person who might bring about peace and true national reconciliation is the former king Mohammad Zahir.

The decision to re-establish the same governmental structure that the country adopted in 1992 - when the Najibullah regime collapsed and the Mujahedin came to power - is seen as a major source of tension, as the system was weighted against Pashtuns, the country's biggest ethnic group.

Although the Prime Minister, Hamid Karzai, is a Pashtun, the key ministries of defence, the interior and foreign affairs have gone to the Jamiat Islami and Shurai Nezar parties, dominated by ethnic Tajiks, which formerly followed the Tajik warlord Ahmad Shah Masood.

The Pashtun governor of Jalalabad, Haji Abdul Qadir, walked out of last year's Bonn conference on establishing a new government, in protest against the agreement. Without such senior communal representatives, it is not surprising that the interim administration is viewed with distrust in the Pashtun heartlands.

Recent protests by Afghan generals unhappy with the government have raised fresh concern over the future stability of the country. There are fears that their feelings of disappointment may lead to a resumption of armed struggle.

But it's not just Pashtun commanders who are unhappy with the new authorities. Generals Abdul Rashid Dostum, an Uzbek, and Ismail Khan, a Hazara, felt the Bonn deal cheated them of representation in government.

Kabul officials allayed Dostum's concerns by appointing him deputy defence minister and representative for the north of the country. And they kept Khan sweet by allowing him to take up his former post as governor of Herat and giving his son a cabinet position.

Upsetting either of these powerbrokers risked them retreating to their fiefdoms and defying central authority. Indeed, there has already been a marked resurgence of activity among warlords trying to gain control over areas around Kabul where there are no foreign peacekeepers.

In addition to the composition of the government, the other main source of antagonism is favouritism and

nepotism in the appointment of officials. Some say even low-ranking police officers have been handed posts on the basis of their ethnicity and who their relatives are.

Amanullah Khan, an administrator at the Police Academy Institute, said this has led to an absurd situation in his own department. "Under the Taleban I was replaced - and have now got my job back, " he said. "But the Taleban employee who replaced me remains here and another administrator from the ruling party also has been appointed. Now three of us are being paid to do the same job."

Khan said he could hardly fail to notice that the president and two deputy presidents of his academy came from the same ruling faction. "Does that mean that other nationalities have no educated people?" he asked.

Such favouritism and inefficiency, he said, has bred scepticism about the future, "Whenever people are appointed to posts they bring in their friends. We are repeating our former mistakes. We need to vaccinate ourselves against this virus."

Despite the many criticisms of the authorities, most people credit their leaders for bringing about a fragile peace after 23 years of bloodshed.

"At least all the warring factions are sitting around one table," said Mir Hatem, a Pashtun merchant from Ghazni province, "though it is unfortunate the majority nationality has been neglected and all the key posts allotted to a minority."

Mohammad Sabir, from the Pashtani Tejarety Bank, also felt that key government posts had been unjustly allocated, though he agreed that any alternative to war is good. "What matters is bringing an end to all the infighting among the various factions," he said. "That will be a great achievement."

Ooman Wafa is a pseudonym for an Afghan journalist

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