



Written by on August 17, 2009

The Afghan Presidential Election, Part 2

The candidates in Afghanistan's August 20 presidential election were making their final appeals to voters on Monday, the 17th, the last legal day of campaigning before voting starts. In the election, the incumbent, President Hamid Karzai, is facing more than 30 challengers, including two of his former ministers.



Reuters news reported that a rally for Abdullah Abdullah, Karzai's former foreign minister and now his main rival, drew a "chaotic" crowd of thousands of supporters in Kabul's National Olympic Stadium that his security guards had to beat back with rifle butts.

The BBC's Ian Pannell in Afghanistan reported that the campaigns had not departed from normal patterns and quoted Zakria Barakazi, the deputy chief electoral officer of the Independent Electoral Commission, who said: "So far everything is going according to our plans and there is no major security incident."

During Sunday's live, 90-minute televised debate, two of Karzai's rival candidates, ex-ministers Ramazan Bashardost and Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, challenged him about his alliances with warlords. But Karzai defended those alliances, claiming that they served the interests of national unity.

Several news sources, including BBC, Reuters, and Al Jazeera, noted the return to Afghanistan of Abdul Rashid Dostum, an ex-warlord who was once Karzai's military chief-of-staff. Dostum has been living in exile in Turkey since last year. Al Jazeera noted:

Opinion polls have shown Karzai firmly in the lead with about 45 per cent of the vote, but still short of support to win an outright majority to avoid a runoff against Abdullah, his former foreign minister.

The return overnight from exile of Abdul Rashid Dostum, the former leader of an armed Uzbek group, has added an extra dimension to the election outcome.

Dostum won 10 per cent of the vote during the last election in 2004, and his support could tip the balance for Karzai.

Although it was never clear whether his exile was forced or self-imposed, Karzai's government announced on Sunday that the ex-communist was free to return.

A Reuters report made a similar assessment, noting: "Abdullah's frenetic rally came a day after former Uzbek militia leader General Abdul Rashid Dostum jetted back into Afghanistan from exile in Turkey, perhaps to deliver enough support to swing the election for Karzai in a single round." The report continued:

Few of the former militia chiefs are viewed with more suspicion by the West than Dostum, a



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whisky-drinking ex-Communist general whose militia repeatedly changed sides during the civil war. Dostum won 10 percent of the vote during the last election in 2004, and his support could help tip the balance for Karzai.

We didn't know last week that Dostum would soon return to Afghanistan (and, in fact, had heard nothing new about the man in almost eight years) when we brought up his name in our August 10 article "U.S. Targets Afghan Drug Lords Tied to Taliban."

Our main interest in Dostum was his previous leadership role in Afghanistan's Northern Alliance, the anti-Taliban coalition officially known as the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan. From the onset of Taliban control of the country in 1996 until November 2001 the Northern Alliance controlled only 30 percent of the Afghanistan's population. However during the post 9/11 period in November and December 2001, as a result of the bombing of the Taliban's military and facilities by U.S.-led forces, the Northern Alliance gained control of much of the country, including Kabul.

After the ouster of the Taliban, the Northern Alliance exerted substantial influence in the transitional Afghan government of Hamid Karzai. The alliance's Mohammed Fahim became the vice president and minister of defence. Yunus Qanuni became the minister of education and security advisor, and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah became the foreign minister.

Dostum, the main subject of our interest here, was the one-time leader of the National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan — a political party made up of ethnic Uzbeks that was one of five factions forming the Northern Alliance. A revealing exposure of the former Northern Alliance leader's background was included in the December 17, 2001 article in *The New American* magazine by Dr. Steve Bonta: "Meet the Real Northern Alliance." Bonta noted:

Preeminent among Northern Alliance leaders is Rashid Dostum, an ethnic Uzbek and ex-Army general for Afghanistan's communist government. Dostum's stomping ground, Mazar-e-Sharif, was his personal fiefdom from 1992 to 1997, and his men have a particularly unsavory reputation for looting and pillaging. The last time his forces wrested Mazar-e-Sharif from the Taliban, in 1997, Dostum's forces massacred over 2,000 Taliban prisoners, including some who were thrown into wells and then blown apart by hand grenades tossed in with them. In the wake of Dostum's latest victory in Mazar-e-Sharif, both UN and International Red Cross workers reported widespread looting of food aid and atrocities against civilians. Dostum's men seized a convoy of 10 trucks carrying tents and water pumps as well as 89 tons of food from UN warehouses. International aid workers, meanwhile, buried hundreds of bodies, including victims of Northern Alliance reprisals.

Dostum himself is a colorful figure, known for punishing his soldiers by tying them to tank treads and driving around until their bodies are ground into mincemeat. One reporter who visited Dostum's compound for an interview saw the grisly evidence of one such recent execution still scattered around the yard.

Considering Dostum's reputation for brutal and inhumane acts, and the fact that the major news media freely identify him as an "ex-communist," his apparent 11th-hour appearance back in Afghanistan to help Karzai win an electoral majority and avoid a runoff smells fishy, indeed.

An August 17 Reuters report observed of Dostum's arrival back in Kabul late the previous day: "The United Nations and the United States both expressed concern at the prospect he could return to a position in government."



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The report also quoted a U.S. official as saying that Washington had made its "serious concerns" clear to the Afghan government, and that Dostum's reputation "raised questions of his culpability for massive human rights violations."

To which even more penetrating questions might be added, such as:

- Back in 2001, why did our government engage the likes of Rashid Dostum — who was little more than a terrorist himself — as our Northern Alliance ally in our "war on terrorism"?
- Why did we not use our influence with Karzai's government [after all, our troops are dying to save his regime from the Taliban] to insist that it deny Dostum's reentry?
- Why are we sacrificing the lives of U.S. troops on a daily basis, to shore up a regime formed with the assistance of the Northern Alliance, whom Dr. Bonta termed "a diffuse coalition of warlords, ex-Army generals, and tribal leaders united only in their hatred of the Taliban"?

Part of the mission in Afghanistan, supposedly, is to secure the nation for its presidential elections. Secure it enough so that a masochistic former warlord like Rashid Dostum can then use his influence to sway the outcome?

Our military presence in such a dysfunctional nation is nothing short of insanity.

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