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## Talk of Devolution Angers Kabul

By Mina Habib

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Afghan opposition leaders have angered the government by meeting United States Congress members and issuing a call for decentralisation in their country.

Critics of the January 9 meeting in Berlin see it as a case of foreign meddling that could encourage further destabilisation and fragmentation of the state.

The Afghan delegation consisted of leaders of the Afghan National Front, a political bloc opposed to President Hamed Karzai and unhappy about plans to seek peace with the Taleban.

The Afghan National Front was represented by its leader Ahmad Zia Massoud; General Abdul Rashid Dostum, a powerful figure formerly in command of a mainly Uzbek militia; Haji Mohammad Mohaqeq, who heads Hezb-i Wahdat, an ethnic Hazara militia-turned-party; and Amrullah Saleh, former chief of the Afghan security service.



Northern Alliance leaders, Massoud, Dostum and Mohqiq.

Massoud and Saleh come from the Tajik-populated Panshir Valley, so that together with Dostum and Muhaqeq, the front represents the main non-Pashtun factions once known as the Northern Alliance. This group allied itself with the US-led coalition that invaded Afghanistan in late 2001 and drove out the largely Pashtun Taleban.

The US side was led by Congressman Dana Rohrabacher, his fellow-Republicans Louie Gohmert and Steve King, and Democrat Loretta Sanchez.

In a joint statement, participants described the ongoing attempts to come to terms with the insurgents as flawed because they excluded Northern Alliance factions that helped oust the Taleban regime back in 2001.

“The present form of discussions with the Taliban is flawed, as it excludes anti-Taleban Afghans. The present negotiations with the Taleban fail to take into account the risks, sacrifices and legitimate interests of the Afghans who ended the brutal oppression of all Afghans,” the statement said.

Rohrabacher said a coalition government with the Taleban would be a betrayal of the Americans who had died in Afghanistan, and of the Northern Alliance members who supported the US invasion.

The Afghan authorities are pursuing negotiations with insurgent groups via its High Peace Council, and on a somewhat separate track, the Taleban are expected to open a mission in Qatar through which they will talk to the international community. (See Afghans Demand Ownership of Taleban Talks Process on the controversy surrounding the Qatar office.)

Controversially, the joint statement called for administrative authority to be devolved to regional level. It suggested a revised constitution could correct “inherent flaws in the present power structure by decentralising the political system, making it more compatible with the diverse political, social and cultural nature of Afghanistan”.

At national level, the statement said, Afghanistan should have a parliamentary democracy rather than a “personality-centred presidential system”, and at subnational level, provincial governors should be elected and regional councils given more power.

“Such elected governors and provincial councils should also have authority for such things as creating budgets and generating revenue, overseeing police and healthcare, as well as establishing educational authority, if they so desire,” it said.

Afghanistan’s foreign ministry condemned the unofficial talks, saying they undermined national unity, and were tantamount to foreign interference.

“If [people] contact foreign countries without consulting the Afghan government and go against the national interest, we not only disagree with such action, we condemn it,” Hamid Elmi, a spokesman for Karzai, told IWPR.

The US State Department washed its hands of the meeting, saying its view was that such talks should take place in Afghanistan, and it had not sanctioned the meeting, according to RFE/RL.

"We also believe it's always best when our members of Congress can see a broad cross section of Afghan political leaders, not just a slice," State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said, according to the Associated Press. "But it's within their right to meet with whomever they'd like."

The German government said in a statement that it was not involved in arranging the private event.

Faizullah Zaki, a spokesman for the Afghan National Front, defended the talks, saying they allowed the opposition to air their views internationally.

Many commentators in Afghanistan shared their government’s anger with the Berlin meeting.

Ramazan Bashardost, an independent-minded member of parliament who is no supporter of Karzai, said he was saddened by the affair, and accused the Americans of supporting individuals “whose hands are stained with the blood of the people”.

He said he suspected the US was planning to put together a “salad” of unsavoury political figures and “force-feed” the concoction to the Afghan people, “even if it makes them vomit”.

Devolution, which many fear would turn Afghanistan into a collection of mini-states defined by ethnicity and ruled by warlords, is a hugely controversial issue in the country. Political analyst Wahid Mozhda warned against any plan to carve up Afghanistan.

“Wherever America has intervened, it has subsequently left a legacy of balkanisation,” he said.

Another analyst, Ghafur Liwal, also spoke out against moves that could lead to fragmentation. He said there were some in the US and Afghanistan who had been panicked by their respective governments’ policies of engaging with insurgent groups, and were responding by bolstering the former Northern Alliance leaders now in opposition, as an “instrument to intimidate the Karzai government”.

On the streets of the capital, Afghans differed in their reactions to the unofficial Berlin

diplomacy.

Kabul resident Hakim Shariyar said that opposition leaders were entitled to express their opinions, and that he would like to see the central monopoly on power reduced, and greater authority given to parliament.

But Kabul University student Gul Rasul said Afghanistan was already far too fragmented. He traced this state of affairs back to the chaos that followed the collapse of President Najibullah's administration in 1992, which led to years of internecine warfare among the various militarised factions.

Even today, he said, local leaders had far too much independent authority.

“Doesn't Atta Mohammad Nur, the governor of Balkh province, have an independent government? It's obvious that he doesn't obey the Karzai government. Isn't that federalism?” Rasul asked.

Atta Mohammad did not attend the Berlin talks, saying he did not agree with its agenda. Nor did Abdullah Abdullah, who like him came out of the same Northern Alliance faction as Massoud. A spokesman for Abdullah's Coalition for Change and Hope, Sayed Hussain Sancharaki, said the group opposed a federal solution for Afghanistan.