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Afghanistan risks chaos as political divisions produce power vacuum

Chris Sands and Fazelminallah Qazizai

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Before dawn, crowds form outside the passport office in Kabul as Afghans wait for the chance to take another step towards fleeing their homeland.

Near the entrance are rudimentary adverts offering visas to Turkey and Iran. Having received their passports and paid thousands of dollars to human traffickers, many of those queuing up in the cold will travel via these countries to Europe. Others will go through Russia and on into Norway.

More than a year after the US brokered a deal to form a national unity government and avert a potential civil war, Afghanistan's problems are mounting. Districts are falling to the Taliban, armed militias are gaining strength, unemployment is rife and the joint administration is struggling to deliver even basic services.

The situation is not as catastrophic as that in Syria, but young people in particular are losing hope. There is now a widespread feeling that Washington's short-term fix after the disputed 2014 presidential election may end up causing a long-term crisis.

Among the Afghans trying to leave the country is Ali Yawer Janan, an engineering graduate who is 25 years old, married and has a baby daughter. An employee at a government ministry, he already has a passport and is now prepared to pay a trafficker US\$5,000 or \$6,000 (Dh18,000 to 22,000) per adult to get to Turkey. From there he hopes to seek asylum in Germany or Austria.

“I am aware of the threats and dangers on the way, but it is better to die once than die a little bit every moment,” he said.

After two rounds of voting, last year’s election was mired in allegations of fraud that threatened to spill over into open conflict. The compromise deal struck by US secretary of state John Kerry saw the US-educated technocrat Ashraf Ghani sworn in as president and a new post of chief executive created for his main rival, Abdullah Abdullah, a former member of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance.

The government subsequently spent months struggling to agree on a cabinet and appoint senior provincial officials. As it did so, new rifts opened up as both sides within the administration competed for greater influence.

The Taliban exploited the power vacuum and in late September they seized the northern city of Kunduz, holding it for two weeks. It was the first time a major population centre had fallen from government control in 14 years of war.

Officials were shocked at the city’s collapse, but many ordinary people have been fearing the worst for some time. Ever since the new regime took power it has become increasingly easy to find young men and women actively planning for what they hope will be a better life in Europe.

According to the UN, Afghans have accounted for 19 per cent of refugees and migrants arriving in the continent after crossing the Mediterranean by sea in 2015. They are second in number only to Syrians, who make up 52 per cent of the total.

The demand for passports is so high it now takes two months for the Afghan government to issue them, rather than one. Speaking in the Kot-e Sangi neighbourhood of Kabul, Mr Janan said the main reason he wants to leave the country with his family is the very government for which he works.

“The president and chief executive promised the nation a lot during their campaigns, but they haven’t acted on one of those promises,” he said.

Mr Abdullah has acknowledged this widespread disappointment and asked for more time. However, a large anti-government protest recently took place in Kabul and officials continue to be split and confused over key decisions.