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Afghan political crisis intensifies as two-year anniversary nears

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A simmering crisis over the survival of Afghanistan’s two-man National Unity Government has burst into the open, revealing a deep split between President Ashraf Ghani and chief executive Abdullah Abdullah as a political deadline for their tenuous power-sharing agreement looms with the government’s two-year anniversary next month.

Abdullah, who was Ghani’s top electoral rival, accepted his job as chief executive reluctantly under an emergency deal brokered by U.S. officials after the fraud-plagued 2014 election, and the partnership has often been tense. On Thursday, he complained publicly that the president, known as a hyperactive micro-manager, barely has “an hour or two” to meet him alone for months at a time. Referring to Ghani sarcastically as “your excellency,” he suggested that someone with so little patience for discussion is “not fit for the presidency.”

The unexpectedly harsh comments from Abdullah, a former diplomat, went viral on social media after he made them on live TV to a group of visitors. His outburst came amid weeks of mounting pressure for political change from a variety of government opponents, including former president Hamid Karzai and former ethnic warlords, as well as widening public concern about the legitimacy and responsiveness of the troubled administration.

Although the president's term of office is for five years, the power-sharing agreement between Ghani and Abdullah called for a series of political steps to be taken by the government's two-year anniversary on Sept. 29, culminating in a national leadership meeting that would decide whether to amend the constitution and elevate Abdullah's position to executive prime minister.

None of those steps has been taken because of protracted delays in government appointments, disputes over electoral reforms and official preoccupation with two far more dire priorities: battling an aggressive Taliban insurgency with drastically fewer foreign troops to help and salvaging the economy from near-collapse after the shutdown of a 15-year aid and construction boom that came with the vast international war effort.

As that political deadline approaches, an assortment of powerful opponents have intensified their attacks, some demanding favors and others calling for a new governing arrangement. Karzai, who left office reluctantly after nearly 14 years and holds court daily with followers at his home here, has said he wants to convene a traditional meeting of elders and leave the nation's future up to them, possibly under his guidance.

Foreign diplomats, including U.S. Ambassador Michael McKinley, have been meeting with an array of critics and reportedly urging them not to risk bringing down the government, however imperfect. According to some Afghan participants, the envoys have stressed that no legal or reasonable alternative exists and that the country cannot afford a new phase of political instability with war raging and the economy just beginning to come out of deep recession.

The United States has an especially important stake in defusing the crisis, with billions of dollars in U.S. aid spent and more than 2,000 American lives lost in a 15-year effort to defeat Islamist militants and build a sustainable democracy in the impoverished Muslim country. A collapse of the unity government, set up under pressure from the Obama administration, could also damage Democratic prospects in the U.S. presidential elections in November.

Officials from both the Ghani and Abdullah camps have recently tried to tamp down the cacophony of rumors and threats, insisting that their uneasy partnership has improved and that they are moving ahead with an ambitious agenda of reforms and development, from establishing a new anti-corruption investigative agency to creating hundreds of miles of utility corridors that will carry electricity and fibre optic cables across the country.

In an interview earlier this week with The Washington Post, Abdullah played down his differences with Ghani, calling it an "unfortunate perception that we fight every day." He said the public has "legitimate concerns about our future stability" but that other critics have been using the upcoming deadline as an opportunity to apply pressure for their own interests.

"We will pass through September head-on, and there will be a legitimate process within the mandate of the people, but we have to be realistic," he said. "Electoral reforms will come, and elections will come, but it needs time. This government is for five years." If the "worst case" should arise, he said, meaning government collapse, "everyone will lose except the Taliban and al Qaeda."

Nader Nadery, a senior aide to Ghani, offered a similar defense, saying that while it was politically important to meet deadlines, the public was more concerned about security and

economic recovery. “We have been fighting a war for survival and it has used up huge amounts of time and energy,” Nadery said in an interview Wednesday. “Once people see the efforts we are making, the politicians can still create trouble but they will have less of a leg to stand on.” There was no immediate comment from Ghani’s office Friday.

But Afghans are already impatient with the government, which promised sweeping reforms that are just beginning to take hold and complex development projects that have yet to bring jobs and money. Meanwhile, people have watched two years of endless wrangling between Abdullah and Ghani over job appointments that delayed cabinet positions for months, left security ministries leaderless and allowed urgently needed election reforms to bog down in ethnic disputes.

“There have been too many delays with too few results. These two years will haunt the government for the next three,” said Haroun Mir, an analyst in Kabul. “People don’t expect them to fix the economy and security overnight, but they can’t tolerate the corruption and the unfulfilled promises. If the government had a stronger team, we would not be seeing this political crisis, but no one is out there defending them, and the same old warlords are still in positions of power. People are tired, they are leaving, and they have lost hope.”

Of the two partners in the unity government, Abdullah is more vulnerable to outside pressure, which appears to explain his sudden lashing out at Ghani. Unlike the president, his position is temporary and its status will now likely remain unclear after September. He is also beholden to certain regional leaders and parties that backed his campaign, were part of negotiations that led to the power-sharing agreement and are frustrated that Abdullah has not wrested more influence for them from his position as CEO.

One of them is Attah Mohammed Noor, the longtime governor of Balkh Province and a leader of the Jamiat party, an outgrowth of the Northern Alliance militias that fought against the Taliban. In an interview last week, Noor complained that Ghani had snubbed Jamiat, marginalized Abdullah and monopolized decisions through a small ethnic clique. He said it was imperative that the political agreement be fulfilled and Abdullah’s future role legitimized.

“We want to avoid a crisis. If the government fulfills its promises, we will cooperate. If not, after September we may withdraw our support,” Noor said. “We must be given our rights. We will not be insulted.” Noor, who commands the support of thousands of former fighters, once threatened to cause mayhem in Kabul if Abdullah were not recognized as the winner of the 2014 elections. Party members are now gathering for a month-long convention in Kabul.

On Friday, another Jamiat leader, former national intelligence chief Amrullah Saleh, said his party strongly supported Abdullah and his comments Thursday, saying he had stood by silently for too long while Ghani “amassed personal power in the name of reform.” He warned that by ignoring Abdullah’s demands, Ghani is “making a grave miscalculation.” If they are not met, Saleh said, “it would lead to complete paralysis.”

Other critics profess to have no self-interest at stake, but say the rapidly growing sense of crisis and uncertainty has to be assuaged. All seem to agree that Karzai’s plan to hold a traditional assembly of elders would solve nothing and undermine the process of building a constitutional democracy. Some suggest that local and parliamentary elections be swiftly announced for next

year. Others have urged bringing in more cabinet members and expanding the political diversity of the unity government.

“This whole catastrophe can be avoided if they allow more people to participate,” said Anwar al-Ahady, a former cabinet minister and Central Bank director. “The government has failed miserably, but nobody wants chaos. We want to see an orderly change, either from the inside or through elections. If people get mobilized to demonstrate, the government could collapse. If it stays without making changes, it will be putting out brush fires every day. We have to find a way to solve this, and there is very little time.”