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Charges and Clashing Interests Mar Selection of a Cabinet for Afghanistan

By ROD NORDLAND

KABUL, Afghanistan — Choosing the Afghan cabinet is to government what the national sport of buzkashi is to polo: a wild and woolly version with uniquely local characteristics and notably more carnage.

President Ashraf Ghani's presentation of new cabinet nominees to Parliament on Tuesday was a case in point. One proposed nominee had just pulled out after revelations of an Interpol warrant for his arrest. Another dropped out, complaining that he did not have enough money and jobs to bribe Parliament into approving him. A third was subject to a social media smear campaign alleging that she had just gotten a new identity card so she could add a few years to her age to qualify for the job.

Several other would-be ministers were reportedly headed to the exits before Parliament got a chance to vote on them, as revelations tumbled out about dual citizenships, frowned on by the Afghan Constitution, or even, in one case, allegedly not being fluent in any national language.

"The candidate for rural development studied urban development, and the candidate for urban development studied rural development," said Ramazan Bashardost, an anticorruption crusader and member of Parliament, famous for his outspokenness. "It is another buzkashi game for the presidential palace."

It did not help the appearance of disarray that the formation of the cabinet had already been more than three months in the making, held up as Mr. Ghani and his chief executive and political rival, Abdullah Abdullah, hashed out a compromise that would balance the cabinet among competing ethnic and political interests.

All of this might be comical if it were not also potentially tragic. In the view of Ahmad Nader Nadery, head of the Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit, the cabinet proposed by Mr. Ghani and Mr. Abdullah is in some ways one of the best the country has ever seen — if it survives the parliamentary process and the wave of revelations about the qualifications of candidates.

Not only is it generally younger and better qualified than past bodies, but the many new faces are a welcome change from the revolving cast of former warlords, jihadist commanders and old-guard figures who have dominated previous Afghan governments, Mr. Nadery said.

In addition, both Mr. Abdullah and Mr. Ghani agreed on a government in defiance of many of the hard-liners who had supported them during the election. "There isn't a single old face in the proposed cabinet," Mr. Nadery said. "They pushed aside those big players who have been in every government we've had. This is payback."

In theory, the new 25-member cabinet, plus the head of the central bank and the intelligence service, was meant to be split equally between the two camps, and it was expected to strike a balance among the country's four major ethnic groups.

Backers of both candidates have cried foul, however, some complaining about ethnic or regional imbalances, others about political disloyalty.

Many of those doing the complaining were clearly behind the payback revelations about the qualifications of the would-be ministers — some of them uncomfortably on the mark.

Links to the website of Interpol were emailed around, referencing a red notice that said the proposed minister for agriculture, Yaqub Haidari, was wanted for large-scale tax evasion and fraudulent conversion in, of all places, Estonia. Mr. Haidari could not be reached for comment, but his aides have said he claims the charges are for activities of a company to which he is no longer connected.

Nonetheless, Mr. Haidari's name was withdrawn from the cabinet list. As a member of Interpol, Afghanistan would be expected to arrest anyone subject to an Interpol red notice.

A more prominent nominee, Jilani Popal, a well-regarded former government official, withdrew his name from nomination as finance minister. While he is believed to have dual United States and Afghan citizenship, Mr. Popal told friends that he had pulled out when members of Parliament asked him for a total of 400 jobs in exchange for their votes, most of them in the lucrative customs service, leaving him with no slots for unstained candidates.

"He said he decided to withdraw his nomination because of the M.P.s' demands," said a friend and former Afghan diplomat, Ahmad Saeedi. "He said he couldn't do that for them." Mr. Popal could not be reached for comment.

Posts soon began appearing on various forms of social media, including Facebook and Twitter, purporting to show the old identity documents of Khatera Afghan, the nominee to be minister of higher education, alongside her purported new identity documents, issued only a couple weeks ago.

The documents suggested that Ms. Afghan's age had suddenly gone up to 38 from the original 32. Ms. Afghan could not be reached for comment, and there was no way to verify the authenticity of the documents. Her picture does perhaps suggest someone on the younger side of 35, the minimum age for cabinet members.

The old guard did a lot more than dish dirt on the newcomers.

Ismail Khan, the warlord who has long ruled the western city of Herat and was an important Abdullah supporter in the elections, denounced the lack of ministers from western Afghanistan and said Mr. Abdullah had "disrespected his voters." Similarly, a warlord and member of Parliament, Haji Zahir Qadir, who had supported Mr. Ghani, accused the president of abandoning him and his followers after winning election, and campaigned against the cabinet.

In the northern Panjshir Valley, Tajik followers of Mr. Abdullah held a demonstration last weekend to protest the lack of Panjshiris in the proposed cabinet.

Previously, the Panjshiris, whose assassinated resistance leader Ahmed Shah Massoud is deeply revered, have always had at least one of the three most important security ministries, and other northerners have typically had one of the others.

This time, Mr. Abdullah, himself identified with the Panjshir Valley and the north, agreed to a cabinet in which the three top security jobs were delegated to Pashtuns. While the most numerous of Afghanistan's ethnic groups, the Pashtuns are viewed warily by northerners because the Taliban are mostly Pashtun.

Gen. Sher Mohammad Karimi, now the army chief, is expected to become head of the ministry of defense, while a former communist general, Nur ul-Haq Ulumi, is the proposed choice for the ministry of the interior. Rahmatullah Nabil would lead the National Directorate of Security, the intelligence service. All are Pashtuns.

All of them still have to be approved by an increasingly hostile Parliament. President Ghani fired all of the country's previous cabinet ministers on Nov. 30 rather than keep them on indefinitely. That old guard has many friends in Parliament, and ratification of the proposed cabinet is far from assured.

Joseph Goldstein, Jawad Sukhanyar and Fazal Muzhary contributed reporting.

MASOOD HOSSAINI/ASSOCIATED PRESS

President Ashraf Ghani kissed a flag in a ceremony on Tuesday at Parliament in Kabul.

World Briefing

ASIA

China: Officials Faulted in Shanghai Deaths

The Shanghai city government has blamed poor preparation and lax management by local officials and the police for a stampede that killed 36 people who thronged a popular tourist area on New Year's Eve, according to a report released Wednesday. The report said investigators had recommended that officials from the Huangpu district, which includes the site of the disaster, be dismissed or punished. The deadly pandemonium broke out on the Bund, a historic area with a spectacular view of the city's skyline, when tens of thousands of people gathered there on Dec. 31. Citing the Shanghai government inquiry, Xinhua, the state-run news agency, said investigators had concluded that the deaths were a result of a deadly combination of official errors, including "inadequate safeguards and preparation for a public activity, lax management on the scene and an inappropriate response."

CHRIS BUCKLEY

India: Efforts Help Tiger Population Rise by 30 Percent

India's tiger population has rebounded, growing more than 30 percent in the past four years to 2,226, according to a government census released Tuesday. India is home to 70 percent of the world's tigers, and the latest increase comes after a decade-long effort to fight poaching and mitigate its effects, including a special tiger protection force and programs for orphaned cubs. The figures issued on Tuesday were compiled using 10,000 camera traps, the same technique used for tallies in 2006 and 2010. Belinda Wright, who has worked on tiger conservation in India for 40 years, said that the country still had "a long way to go," and that it must do a better job at preventing poaching.

HARI KUMAR

Nepal: Chaos Erupts at Meeting to Draft Constitution

Maoist opposition leaders in Nepal threw chairs and microphones at members of the governing parties on Tuesday at a meeting to draft a constitution on deadline. Three lawmakers and about a dozen guards were wounded. The opposition alliance, which is led by the Maoist faction of the Communist Party, wants the new constitution to carve provinces along ethnic lines, a provision the governing coalition adamantly opposes. The coalition, led by the Nepali Congress party, commands more than two-thirds of the assembly, providing sufficient votes to push through a draft of the constitution. But such an agreement would be tenuous and short-lived, analysts say.

BHADRA SHARMA

MIDDLE EAST

Palestinian Authority Uses Loans to Pay Employees

The Palestinian Authority has paid its employees 60 percent of their December salaries, using loans to make up for a shortfall caused by Israel's withholding of $127 million in tax revenue it collects on the Palestinians' behalf. Israel halted the monthly transfer of taxes as punishment for the Palestinians' move to join the International Criminal Court. A spokeswoman for the authority said the partial payment was made two weeks late to about 150,000 workers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Arab nations have pledged $100 million as a safety net but have not yet provided any money. The payments exacerbated tensions between the authority and Hamas, whose 40,000 workers in Gaza have not been paid for months.

JODI RUDOREN

THE AMERICAS

Guyana: President Announces Date for Elections

President Donald Ramotar, who suspended Parliament in November to avoid a no-confidence vote, announced Tuesday that general elections would be held on May 11. "I expect to win the election and win back a majority in Parliament," Mr. Ramotar said. His People's Progressive Party, dominated by Indo-Guyanese, has held power for more than 20 years but fell short of a majority in the assembly in 2011 with the rise of a multiethnic third party as a political force. The two main parties have traditionally hewed to racial lines: one drawing support from the descendants of Africans, the other from the descendants of Indians.

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