

Afghan Power-Sharing Deal Would Promote General Accused of Rape

The case is still open against Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum, a strongman from Afghanistan's civil war. But he would become a marshal in order to help settle a bitter election dispute.



By Mujib Mashal

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KABUL, Afghanistan — The two sides in the monthslong dispute over Afghanistan's presidential election are close to signing a power-sharing deal, the terms of which include giving top military honors to a former vice president who is accused of torturing and ordering the rape of a political rival while in office.

A political deal is seen as critical as the government prepares for direct peace talks with the Taliban. But the agreement to honor the former vice president, Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum, by giving him the rank of marshal — awarded only twice before in Afghanistan's history — comes as many Afghans are demanding that accountability for terrorism, war crimes and other brutality be a central part of those talks.

The bitter election dispute has stretched on since the vote in September. In February, President Ashraf Ghani was declared to have been re-elected, but his main opponent, Abdullah Abdullah, called the results fraudulent and took the oath of office at the same time.

The deadlock raised concerns that the Afghan government would be divided and weakened in talks with the Taliban, who have been emboldened by a deal with the United States that has led to the start of an American withdrawal. After significant pressure from the United States, including the cutting-off of \$1 billion in aid, representatives of Mr. Ghani began talks with Mr. Abdullah on power-sharing — just as in 2014, when a presidential contest between the same men led to a similar dispute.

According to the text of their new deal, which was seen by The New York Times on Saturday, Mr. Abdullah will take charge of the peace process with the Taliban. He and Mr. Ghani will each appoint the same number of cabinet ministers, with Mr. Abdullah also having a significant share in the appointment of governors. Mr. Ghani is to remain president.

The promotion for General Dostum — a former vice president under Mr. Ghani who became one of Mr. Abdullah's key backers — was promised by Mr. Abdullah in return for his support, and Mr. Ghani has now consented. The deal is expected to be signed on Sunday.

“The agreement is final, but discussions continue on some of the details,” said Fraidoon Khwazoon, a spokesman for Mr. Abdullah.

A senior official close to Mr. Ghani said that giving General Dostum what he characterized as an honorary title was one small part of a desperate effort to prevent the political crisis from devolving into a civil war and to let the government focus on negotiating with the Taliban. He called it a poison pill that Mr. Ghani was swallowing to prevent bloodshed.



Ahmad Ishchi said in television interviews in 2016 that General Dostum had tortured him and ordered his guards to sexually assault him. Omar Sobhani/Reuters

General Dostum has denied the accusations, calling them part of a conspiracy against him. One of his senior political aides, Enayatullah Babur Farahmand, said the promotion would be long-overdue recognition for the military role the general played in toppling the Taliban government in 2001 after the U.S. invasion.

General Dostum, who is accused of human rights abuses stretching back to the country's civil war in the 1990s, was accused in 2016 of abducting and attempting to rape Ahmad Ishchi, a fellow Uzbek and a former deputy who became a political rival.

Mr. Ishchi broke down on national television as he described the episode, saying the vice president had beat him up in front of thousands of people at a sports arena; brought him to a home he owned, where he tortured him for days and tried to rape him; then ordered his guards to sexually assault him with the barrels of their guns. Medical reports after Mr. Ishchi's release showed injuries consistent with sexual assault.

There were outcries and promises of justice, within Afghanistan and internationally. The United States and the European Union called for investigations. Mr. Ghani said that no one was above the law and that justice would be served.

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But though the case has remained open, General Dostum has returned to the center of national politics, after a stint in exile in Turkey.

Mr. Ghani's team toyed with the idea of seeking the general's support in the 2019 election. And Mr. Abdullah, whom General Dostum ended up backing, promised that if elected, one of his first official acts would be to promote him. Senior American officials visited the general at his home, posing for photos with him. The top American commander even presented the general with gifts, appearing to pin on his chest what the U.S. military later said was a "commander's coin and a NATO pin."

Patricia Gossman, associate Asia director for Human Rights Watch, said the general's pending promotion summed up how justice and accountability had been regarded in Afghanistan since 2001. "This does not bode well for those hoping the government will speak for victims in the peace talks," she added.

An official close to Mr. Ghani said that the government had done what was possible in a fragile situation against a strongman who had thousands of armed followers and support from neighboring countries: It had forced him into exile for 15 months, even turning back his plane when he first tried to return, and stripped him of all executive authority as vice president.

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Although reports of General Dostum's promotion have been circulating for weeks, there have been no signs of objection from Western allies, which have been pushing for weeks for a political compromise — though many had earlier called for an investigation of Mr. Ishchi's accusations.

"The decisions made to form an inclusive government are decisions that the Afghans are making," Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan reconciliation, told reporters in Washington on Friday. "But I generally am of the view that any process for peace requires a balance between requirements of justice and requirements of ending a war."

General Dostum, 66, hopes to cement a legacy as a champion of his minority Uzbek people, having become Afghanistan's first Uzbek vice president. Mr. Ghani, who made the general his 2014 running mate despite having once called him a "known killer," tried to marginalize him soon after taking office. Infuriated, General Dostum responded with erratic shows of force.



President Ashraf Ghani, right, and his political rival Abdullah Abdullah, left, with the NATO secretary general, Jens Stoltenberg, in Kabul in February. Wakil Kohsar/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

There has been little accountability for any of the warlords involved in Afghanistan's 1990s civil war, which left Kabul in ruins and plunged the country into bloody chaos that still continues. Many of those men grew prosperous with the backing of the United States military over the past two decades.

Mr. Farahmand, the aide to General Dostum, said Mr. Ishchi's accusations could not prevent the general's promotion, because they had not been supported by any court ruling.

When pressed that the abduction had happened in front of a crowd, and that Mr. Ishchi had been released with bruises and wounds, Mr. Farahmand said, "I am not saying he wasn't beaten, I am not saying he didn't have bruises, but he was not raped — I can say that 100 percent."

Mr. Farahmand said the courts were not impartial and that the government had conspired to marginalize the general. He cited a 2016 attack on the general's convoy, which Afghan officials blamed on the Taliban but General Dostum called the work of Afghanistan's intelligence agency.

"This was a political conspiracy — this was the excuse to eliminate General Dostum," Mr. Farahmand said. "They couldn't eliminate him physically, they came for character assassination."

Lara Jakes contributed reporting from Washington.