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Reforming Jombesh

An Afghan Party on its Winding Road to Internal Democracy

This paper is part of an AAN series that looks at the development of political parties and movements in Afghanistan. The aim of the series is to fill the gaps that exist in the current literature by exploring the role of political parties in the contemporary political system and by documenting the history of political movements that continue to play an important role or have been often overlooked.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Apart from some notable exceptions, few of the over 100 political parties registered after the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 in Afghanistan had any semblance of internal democracy. The vast majority of registered parties are personality-driven vehicles created to fulfil the personal political ambitions of their leaders and usually run like client-patron networks with little if any institutionalisation. Jombesh-e Melli Islami Afghanistan (The National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan – NIMA), led by General Abdul Rashid Dostum, is a notable exception particularly amongst the larger and more established parties in the sense that it has established visible party structures at the district and provincial level, held internal elections for the party's leading bodies and attempted to curb the influence of its former military commanders. The party now approaches its planned – and already often delayed – fourth congress.

This congress constitutes a crossroads for Jombesh itself: will the party continue to evolve away from its militia past and consolidate reforms made or will the reform process be stopped or even turned back? This could also be important for the wider Afghan political landscape as a successful reform of

Jombesh might encourage other parties – or their pro-reform protagonists – to follow suit.

This paper looks at the internal processes within the party following its third congress in 2008 and leading up to the decision to call the party's fourth congress in the autumn of 2011. Most of the information has been gathered from numerous meetings with Jombesh party officials and activists in those years. The paper briefly sketches the party's pre-2008 evolution, with a focus on the run up to the party's third congress in 2008, starting with its origin as an all-Northern and cross-factional supra-ethnic movement.

What is evident is that the internal reforms of the party have stalled – largely due to internal conflicts not only between pro- and anti-reform groups but also within the reformist group that, following the 2010 parliamentary elections, was sharply divided over the way forward with reform. The continued personal role and influence of the party leader as well as election-related politicking, which rates access to government positions higher than the party's strength as an independent political force, have further hampered the party's evolution.

A new, younger generation of leaders has emerged within the party and is pushing for greater influence while some of the older reformers have

lost influence. For a while it looked like a broad compromise had been struck between these various reform actors, so as to enable the fourth party congress to go ahead with one of the younger leaders likely to be elected as party chairman, but with little room for manoeuvre for further reforms. However that compromise now looks in doubt as continued divisions have prevented the planning for the fourth party congress to actually commence. The congress had been called for the Afghan New Year that started at the end of March this year but as of yet no preparations are underway putting in doubt that the congress will be held anytime soon.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a dearth of structured and institutionalised political parties on Afghanistan's political scene. With the notable exception of a few smaller and newer parties that emerged after the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, none have any semblance of internal democracy. The vast majority of parties are personality-driven vehicles for the personal political ambitions of their leaders and usually run like client-patron networks with little if any institutionalisation. None of the older and larger parties have done any serious sustained reform work, in particular the politico-military factions of the 1980s' jihad and the civil wars of the 1990s, some of whom already emerged in the late 1970s (the so-called tanzim¹) and still dominate the political landscape today.

The one larger party with roots in the country's jihad and civil war era of the 1980s and 1990s that has actually embarked on some sort of a sustained

¹ Tanzim translates as '(political) organisation' and is commonly used by Afghans in reference to the seven major Sunni parties based in Peshawar and the Shia party Wahdat based in Iran who were the main protagonists of the 1980s anti-Soviet jihad and later of the civil war of the 1990s. The tanzims usually ran political offices in Peshawar and Iran where propaganda activities were run and money and weapons collected and then disbursed to the local commanders in the field alongside medical equipment and some humanitarian assistance. With few exceptions, they were loosely organised, and there was substantial competition between them in recruiting commanders in the field through provisions of weapons and money. For more details see Barnett Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 2nd Edition, New Haven, Yale University Press 2002, part 3; Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1990, chs 7 and 8; and Gilles Dorransoro, *Revolution Unending*, New York, Columbia University Press 2005, chs 3, 4 and 6.

reform process is Jombesh. Admittedly, Jombesh does not share the same background as the other tanzim,² but it swiftly evolved into a politico-military faction along the lines of the tanzim during the civil war period of 1992–96. Following the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the politico-military faction most eager to recast themselves into a political party was Jombesh. Since then, Jombesh has held two party congresses, established party structures at district and provincial level with internal elections, attempted to curb the influence of the old military class of the party's past, and tried to force them to play by the rules of the party as enshrined in a party charter, and voted for elected representatives of its membership. This puts Jombesh apart from the rest of the major parties that emerged during the conflicts of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, providing a potential positive democratic example – something that can be very valuable as Afghanistan proceeds into its next election cycle.

As Jombesh tries to arrange its fourth party congress it is worth taking a closer look at the party's current situation and the prospects for a continued reform process within the party as well as the obstacles it faces.

The party's fourth congress was called on 20 October 2011, by the Central Council of the Jombesh party that met at its headquarters in Sheberghan in the province of Jowzjan. By deciding to call a party congress the Central Council endorsed previous recommendations of the party secretariat and the Political Committee. The council proposed a date for the congress – shortly after the Afghan New Year in late March 2012 and instructed the Political Committee to set up a preparative committee tasked with making the practical preparations for the congress. However due to internal divisions the preparative committee is yet to be set up.

The Central Council meeting had been expected for some time – internally Jombesh leaders were talking about a party congress already in the spring of 2010. The party charter envisages a congress every other year and, with the third congress organised in 2008, the fourth should have been held in 2010. But with parliamentary elections taking place in September 2010 and the party suffering from internal divisions, it was informally decided to not discuss a congress until after the parliamentary elections. The party's failure at the ballot boxes, however, led to a deepening of the internal divisions and increased demands for a

² It emerged from a pro-government militia established in the early 1980s.

congress to be arranged swiftly, something that almost all in the Jombesh leadership³ agreed upon. However, the post-election divisions delayed the process as every faction manoeuvred to influence the process.

In accordance with procedure as enshrined in the party charter, the party's secretariat finally met to discuss the issue on 24 April 2011 in Kabul and decided to recommend holding a party congress. This decision was endorsed by the Political Committee in its meeting in Mazar-e Sharif on 2 May after which the Central Council formally decided on 20 October to hold a party congress. The delay in gathering the Central Council following the initial recommendations was in part logistical – the council is a large body that only meets occasionally – but also due to the continued power struggles within the party with some disputing the current make up of its Central Council.⁴

Since 2002, the party has seen tensions ebb and flow between internal groups that seek reforms and those who resist those reforms in order to maintain their own influence. Jombesh's long time leader, founder and one of Afghanistan's more well-known former warlords, General Abdul Rashid Dostum,⁵ has politically balanced between the need for reform within the party while seeking to protect his own influence and maintain his networks of former military commanders that, up until the second congress in 2002, dominated the party. Internal resistance to reforms and struggles

amongst the reformists on how to best to proceed has meant that changes have come slowly and fitfully. Party insiders saw the second party congress in 2002 as having ushered in a transition from an essentially military organisation to a political-military organisation with a number of technocrats and members of the former communist urban intelligentsia voted into leadership positions ahead of prominent military commanders of the movement.⁶

After long delays following internal political conflicts a third party congress was finally held in 2008, in itself a further important step on the path of reform. During that congress, the party's founder, Dostum, formally stepped aside (although he had already resigned as chairman several years earlier in order to accept the largely symbolic government post of Chief of Staff for the Commander in Chief of the armed forces of Afghanistan)⁷ and instead accepted the ceremonial position as 'Founding Father of the Party'. At the same time a revised charter, including a leadership structure, for the party was passed and agreed upon.

In the run up to the 2008 congress, the political fortunes of General Dostum were in decline largely due to his increasing marginalisation on the national political stage and a well publicised scandal⁸ that gave the reformists the chance to accelerate the reform of the party. However, their failure to wring concessions out of President Karzai following the party's support for the president's re-election bid in 2009, and their failure in the parliamentary elections that saw Jombesh lose seats in the lower house of the National Assembly (the Wolesi Jirga) created rifts amongst the reformists themselves and gave Dostum the opportunity to reclaim some political standing as

³ Jombesh has a party chairman, a party secretariat of 13 members that runs the daily affairs of the party, a 55-member Political Committee that decides on major administrative and some policy issues, and the Central Council, that on paper is to have 105 members (but in reality is far larger), that was formed to make the major policy decisions of the party.

⁴ The Central Council is supposed to have 105 members, but the third party congress failed to hold the elections for the Council. Instead it was decided that the Council would be made up of all the present members at the congress, close to 800. Of those 800, some 300 had been inserted into the proceedings through various manipulations of the party's founder, General Dostum. Outline of events based on conversations with Jombesh officials in Kabul, April and May 2011, as well as a telephone interview with Jombesh official in Kabul, November 2011.

⁵ Dostum was awarded the rank of a general by the pre-1992 PDPA (Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan)/Watan party government (and it was confirmed by the Mujahedin government under Prof Sebghatullah Mojaddedi in 1992) for his role – by switching sides to the Mujahedin – in bringing down the last Soviet-backed regime of President Dr Najibullah earlier the same year.

⁶ Conversation with Jombesh official in Kabul, February 2011.

⁷ Article 64 of the Afghan constitution proclaims the president as the commander in chief of the armed forces of Afghanistan. However, it does not bestow on him any powers in relation to the armed forces, as commander in chief the president does have the right to declare war except with the approval of parliament. In essence, Dostum is chief of staff to one of the president's more symbolic duties and will have, even in the event of a declaration of war, a limited function.

⁸ 'Afghanistan: Kabul Siege Underscores Warlord Threat to Rule of Law', *Radio Free Europe*, 8 February 2008, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1079428.html>; Ron Synovitz, 'Afghan prosecutor suggests "some people" cannot be tried', *Radio Free Europe*, 8 February 2008, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1347735.html>; 'Ex-Afghan warlord suspended', *BBC*, 19 February 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7253703.stm.

well as influence. This internal political dynamic in the party delayed the process of calling the fourth party congress and leaves the party at an important crossroad, as the congress has still not materialised. The congress's outcome will determine whether the party will continue to evolve away from its militia past and consolidate reforms made. This will depend on whether Dostum and the networks of mostly former military commanders will resist reform and reassert themselves. If the contradiction between reformers and 'conservatives' is not solved, or at least another compromise is found, that may lead the party to split as a result of its internal divisions and frictions.

2. ORIGINS OF JOMBESH: A SHORT REVIEW

Jombesh-e Melli Islami Afghanistan (The National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan – NIMA) originated in the early 1990s as an amalgamation of various groups with very little in common, bar the need for a political platform for their military organisations in order to increase their own legitimacy and bargaining power following the fall of the Najibullah government in the spring of 1992.

In the early 1990s, the north of Afghanistan was the relatively stable backyard of the slowly crumbling communist regime. It was garrisoned by substantial pro-government militia formations.⁹ The largest and most prominent of these was under the command of General Abdul Rashid Dostum.¹⁰ In January 1992, however, Dostum

⁹ Due to difficulties, particularly in rural areas, in recruitment for the armed forces, the communist regime formally authorized the creation of militias in 1983-84. Over the course of the war, the militia system expanded and by the late 1980s the government actively pursued a strategy of recruiting armed groups of the jihadi parties for its militias. By the end of the war, the communist regime was heavily dependent on militias for its survival. Further details on the usage of militias can be found in Antonio Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud: Wars and Warlords in Afghanistan*, London, Hurst 2009, ch 3; Rubin, *The fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 2nd section; and Antonio Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan*, London, Georgetown University Press 2000, 198-231. There is also a passage on the subject in Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending* [see FN 1], ch 5.

¹⁰ Dostum was born 1955 in a village outside of Sheberghan in the central areas of Jowzjan province; ethnically he is an Uzbek. In 1973, he joined the army as a paratrooper. After the Soviet invasion in 1979, he was given the command of a small local party militia guarding installations of the natural gas sector. He was quickly

refused to accept the appointment of a Pashtun general as his deputy in command of all military forces of the north by President Najibullah. Together with several regular army units he withdrew support from the communist government. Instead they allied themselves with a number of prominent Mujahedin groups in the north, forming the 'Movement of the North', or 'Harakat-e Shamal'.

This movement included many of the leading commanders of all mujahedin factions operating in the north, such as Hezb-e Islami, Jamiat-e Islami, the Shia-dominated Hezb-e Wahdat-e Islami, Ittihad-e Islami, Harakat-e Islami and Harakat-e Enqelab-e Islami. Several of them had previously fought each other but now decided to join forces with their erstwhile enemies, the communist militias, to strengthen the bargaining position of regional forces vis-à-vis the government in Kabul. Dostum became the representative of the former pro-government militia leaders within the movement.¹¹

The communist regime's loss of the north led to its rapid unravelling and subsequent fall in April 1992. Shortly after this, Harakat-e Shamal began interacting with the new central government in Kabul established by the Mujahedin. The demands of Harakat to be included in the political discussions were rebuffed by the new government, and the leaders of the movement began feeling increasingly side-lined.

The leaders of Harakat decided to increase their bargaining power as well as to try and unify all of the various political interests that had coalesced into Harakat by forming a political party along the lines of the other military-political factions of the jihadi movement. Thus on 1 June 1992, it held its first congress and established Jombesh-e Melli Islami party. The Executive Council of the party had 31 members representing a surprising mixture of various northern interests – ten former members of the communist party, two from the Ismaili minority, and five officers of the armed forces of the communist regime. The remaining fourteen were representatives of the six different jihad groups that had operated in the north. Dostum was elected as the leader, and mujahedin commander Atta Mohammad Noor, the current,

promoted, and by 1989 he was commanding the 7th Army Corps with responsibility for northern Afghanistan. Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud* [see FN 9], 56-57.

¹¹ Antonio Giustozzi, 'The ethnicisation of an Afghan faction: Junbesh-i Milli from its origins to the Presidential elections', Crisis Research Centre working paper no 67, *London School of Economics*, London, 2005.

long-serving governor of Balkh province, of the Jamiat-e Islami jihadi faction, was elected as one of the deputies. Another prominent member at the time included Juma Khan Hamdard of Hezb-e Islami, currently the governor of Paktia.¹²

The heterogeneous character of its leadership, with a slight majority of former pro-regime forces, led to constant power struggles. But by 1994, when Jombesh helped to trigger a new round of the civil war,¹³ Dostum had defeated several challenges to his leadership and firmly established himself as the leader of the party. Jombesh had by then also established a basic party structure, had a regionalist agenda and, due to the predominance of urban leftist within the party cadres,¹⁴ was embracing secularism. However, due to the raging civil war, further development of the party was not a priority. In fact it only became a priority after the international conference on Afghanistan in Bonn 2001, following the collapse of the Taleban regime and the sudden end of the civil war.¹⁵

3. REFORM AND CRISIS, CRISIS AND REFORM

With the overthrow of the Taleban regime in late 2001, the focus amongst the various Afghan factions switched from armed conflict to engagement in the political process as set out in the Bonn conference, with an Emergency Loya Jirga and a Constitutional Loya Jirga to be called in 2002 and 2003 and then followed by presidential and parliamentary elections in 2004 and 2005. The struggle for credible political representation in the political process and the jirgas galvanized the first wave of reform in Jombesh. In the summer of

¹² Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*, [see FN 9], 107; conversation with Jombesh official in Kabul, February 2011.

¹³ Having been offered only a minor position in the new Mujahedin government, Dostum and Jombesh joined forces with Hezb-e Islami in early 1994 in an assault on Kabul against the Jamiat dominated government of Prof Burhanuddin Rabbani in order to force through a renegotiated offer or force the Jamiat dominated government from power.

¹⁴ After the fall of Najibullah, the north of Afghanistan became a refuge for leftist intellectuals and former PDPA cadres, many of whom were drawn into the Jombesh structures that, from the start, contained significant former communist elements particularly from the army and the former government militias.

¹⁵ Further details on the transformation from the original Harakat to the early political manifestation of Jombesh and how it was shaped by the civil war can be found in Giustozzi, 'The ethnicisation of an Afghan faction' [see FN 11].

2002, the party held its second party congress that saw a great number of intellectuals and leftists returning from abroad to join. With Dostum seeing the need to quickly rework his and his militia movement's image in the new political environment, the intellectuals and the reformists of the party carried the day. Many were elected into the leadership council, at the expense of the military commanders of the movement, and one of them, Sayyed Nurullah, a former bureaucrat in the PDPA¹⁶ government, became the first deputy chairman of the party.¹⁷ Their hand was further strengthened by their successful orchestration of Dostum's presidential campaign in 2004 that saw the party emphasize its regional federalist agenda and Uzbek ethnic character. Dostum received 10 per cent of the vote and came in fourth in the polls.

In the following year, this positive wave carried a number of reformist-minded Jombesh party members into parliament. However, what could have been a promising opportunity to broaden their platform and political base as well as to consolidate the reforms of the party was squandered. Before the elections, tensions arose among the former military commanders who felt side-lined as the party adopted a policy of officially supporting educated and, mostly, reform-minded candidates. Many commanders forced themselves onto the party ticket or got elected independently; some walked away from the party.

This disintegration mainly occurred in the northeast province of Takhar but also in the northwest province of Faryab. In Takhar, there was a history of Uzbek commanders switching allegiances between Jamiat-e Islami and Jombesh and, to a certain extent, Hezb-e Islami depending on what interests they felt were at stake – ethnic, regional or personal. In Faryab, various pro-government circles actively recruited commanders to their political causes.¹⁸ At the same time several influential Jombesh members of Arab ethnicity broke away from Dostum and the party. This was cast in ethnic terms, and partially had to do with a

¹⁶ People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), renamed Hezb-e Watan [Homeland Party], in 1990, governed 1978-92.

¹⁷ Conversation with Jombesh official, Kabul, February 2011.

¹⁸ Antonio Giustozzi, 'Afghanistan Political Parties of Militia Fronts' in Jeroen de Zeeuw (ed), *From Soldiers to Politicians, Transforming Rebel Movements after Civil War*, Boulder, Lynne Rienne Publishers 2008; Antonio Giustozzi, 'Armed Politics and Political Competition in Afghanistan' in Mats Berdal and Astrid Suhrke (eds), *The Peace in Between: Post-War Violence and Peacebuilding*, London, Routledge 2011.

growing discontent amongst them over their marginalisation internally, but it was also linked to personal tensions between Dostum and one leading former Arab commander who led the walkout.¹⁹

All of these tensions were further stoked by the creation of the Hezb-e Azadi party (Liberty Party) in the summer of 2004 by Abdul Malik, once a trusted associate of Dostum who later betrayed him during the conflict with the Taliban.²⁰ The Azadi party's run for parliamentary seats created severe tensions with Jombesh, in some instances leading to violent clashes, particularly in the northwest. Once the parliamentary elections were concluded, tensions arose between the group of newly elected Jombesh members of parliament (MP) and Dostum. Some of them felt that during the parliamentary campaign they were not given enough support; they also felt that the party's reform drive was being too strongly dominated by former PDPA officials and they themselves were losing influence. All of them took issue with the fact that Dostum wanted to exercise direct control over their activities as MPs – in response many started to drift away from the party's informal faction in parliament, which further escalated tensions.²¹

Tensions between the newly elected MP's and Dostum came to a head after Dostum's aggressiveness towards them led the entire Jombesh parliamentary group to break with the general.²² At the same time increasing numbers of his former military commanders, accustomed to his patronage, started looking at other political opportunities as Dostum's lack of access to government resources and the loss of previous sources of revenue, such as customs and the exploitation of natural resources. This had led Dostum to suffer, at times, from a lack of monetary funds and other resources to uphold his patronage

¹⁹ Conversation with Jombesh member of parliament, June 2008.

²⁰ Malik betrayed Dostum in 1997 (when the Taliban closed in on Mazar-e Sharif for the first time), helped them to take over the city, switched sides again, was involved in the massacre of the Taliban's northern forces, and was finally forced into exile in the US. Malik returned after 2001 and in 2004 launched his party Hezb-e Azadi with support some from within the presidential palace who were seeking to weaken Jombesh and Dostum at the time.

²¹ Giustozzi, 'Afghanistan Political Parties of Militia Fronts'; Giustozzi, 'Armed Politics and Political competition in Afghanistan' [see FN 18].

²² Giustozzi, 'Afghanistan Political Parties of Militia Fronts'; Giustozzi, 'Armed Politics and Political competition in Afghanistan' [see FN 18].

networks amongst the military commanders. This was only temporarily alleviated by property sales and, excursions into various illegal business ventures as well as possible handouts from some regional intelligence services favourably disposed towards him.²³

Dostum's position became untenable in early 2008. The 2006 crisis of the party had left him estranged from parts of his military network as well as from the reformist wing of the party. Internally, there were increasing calls for more reforms and for him to relinquish control of the party. At the same time he was still cold-shouldered by President Karzai and his administration. Crucially for Dostum, Turkey, a long-standing supporter of the Jombesh party, withheld its support to him following the 2006 crisis. When Dostum assaulted a former aid in his home in Kabul in February 2008, the then attorney general pressed criminal charges against him and suspended him from his governmental chief-of-staff post.²⁴ The risk of criminal proceedings rallied a certain amount of support for Dostum from various northern interests. It also led several leading Jombesh members to press for a political deal to solve the crisis. A deal was eventually brokered, whereby criminal proceedings were dropped in exchange for a public apology and compensation in October 2008.²⁵

With Dostum embattled following the incident, the increasing internal calls for reform and Turkish

²³ The main sources of income for Dostum and Jombesh were derived from the customs post in Hairatan and the oil wells of Sar-e-Pul. Control of the customs post was handed over to the Afghan government in late 2003, and the oil wells were shut down for large-scale illegal exploration in 2005. Conversation with UN political affairs officer in Mazar, August 2008. Further details in regards to Jombesh and Dostum's finances can be found in Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud* [see FN 9], chs 9 and 12. China National Petroleum Corporation settled a deal in December 2011 to explore the oil fields in Sar-e-Pul and Faryab; see Clifford Coonan, 'China first to win oil-hunt rights in the scramble for Afghanistan', *The Independent*, London, 28 December 2011, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/china-first-to-win-oilhunt-rights-in-the-scramble-for-afghanistan-6282135.html>.

²⁴ 'Afghanistan: Kabul Siege', *Radio Free Europe*, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1079428.html>; Ron Synovitz, 'Afghan prosecutor', *Radio Free Europe*, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1347735.html>; 'Ex-Afghan warlord suspended', *BBC*, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7253703.stm.

²⁵ The outline of an agreement was already in place in March, but it was not finalized until the presidential palace interceded following lobbying from Jombesh officials. Conversation with UN official in Kabul, February 2008, and Jombesh official, May and November 2008.

pressure led to a third party congress being held in June 2008. Reforms were carefully pushed there, although not altogether successfully. The congress ratified an updated party charter, including a revised leadership structure consisting of a chairman, a 13-member secretariat, a 55-member Political Committee and a Central Council. The Central Council was supposed to have been composed of around 100 members. But following strong pressure from congress participants, including a significant proportion of whom Dostum had managed to insert into the proceedings outside of the grassroots elections that selected the other delegates, all participants of the congress, some 800, were made members of the Central Council.²⁶ The issue of Central Council membership would later become a stumbling block before the fourth party congress. Several reformists were elected to the secretariat and the Political Committee of the party, with long-time deputy Sayyed Nurullah being determined as the compromise candidate for the chairmanship of the party – while Dostum stepped aside and was given the ceremonial post of ‘Founding Father of the Party’. After several more prominent reformist candidates dropped their bids for the chairmanship, Nurullah was elected with support from Dostum.

Dostum, who left Afghanistan for Turkey after the congress in December 2008, still attempted to manage the party himself from a distance. At the turn of the year, he fired Nurullah and appointed a little known MP and party member, Maulawi Kabir, as new chairman.²⁷ The reasons were manifold: partially it was due to the fact that Nurullah attempted to enforce the overall reform agenda of the congress; partially it was due to Dostum’s perception of the chairman’s role in the political deal that settled the fallout from the scandal with his former aid; and finally there was a spat about party funding over which Dostum felt he, rather than the chairman, should still have control. Dostum failed to gain any widespread support for his move, and after a conciliatory visit of Nurullah and several secretariat members to Turkey as well as a meeting in Mazar-e Sharif with groups who supported Kabir the whole episode was forgotten

²⁶ Conversations with Jombesh officials in Kabul, April 2011.

²⁷ Maulawi Kabir is from Sar-e Pul province where he was a teacher of religious subjects over a 12-year period until he was elected to parliament in 2005. He had been affiliated with Jamiat as well as Hezb-e Islami previously but joined Jombesh shortly before the third congress. At the congress he was elected to the secretariat of the party.

and Nurullah continued as chair.²⁸ Thus, in early 2009, it was the reformists who were dealing with President Karzai on Jombesh’s behalf when he was looking for support in the presidential elections. The president, however, quickly undermined the reformists, and the party as a whole, by reaching out directly to Dostum in Turkey and holding parallel negotiations with him. This led to Dostum’s return to Afghanistan a few days before the presidential elections. At a rally in his stronghold of Sheberghan, he threw his support behind Karzai. Nurullah and most other leading members of Jombesh were conspicuously absent there.²⁹

Following Karzai’s re-election, parallel negotiations ensued between him and Jombesh on one side and between him and Dostum on the other – despite attempts by the reformists championed by Chairman Nurullah on behalf of Jombesh to control the party’s interactions with the president. Towards the end of 2009, Nurullah had at least managed to achieve a certain control over the interactions between Jombesh and the palace. However their failure to wring any visible gains from the president, bar a few nominal positions in government,³⁰ led to a loss of influence on Nurullah’s part. This was further compounded by bitter infighting about who should be given those positions and Dostum’s inevitable manoeuvring behind the scenes through which he was able to claim credit for many of the appointments and nominations. The Jombesh reformists further lost influence following the 2010 parliamentary elections, which saw Nurullah fail in his bid to get elected to parliament. At the same time the number of Jombesh members in parliament diminished, although the overall number of Uzbek deputies remained roughly the same as compared to the 2005-10 parliament.³¹

²⁸ Conversations with Jombesh officials in Kabul, January and February 2009; conversation with former Jombesh official January 2009; conversation with UNAMA political officer in Mazar-e Sharif, February 2009.

²⁹ Conversation with Jombesh official in Kabul, August 2009.

³⁰ There was one governor’s appointment (Jowzjan) and three ministerial nominations. However all ministerial nominees failed in their parliamentary votes – with the president having declined to lobby on the behalf of any of his ministerial nominees.

³¹ The total number of Uzbeks in parliament remains largely the same: in the parliament elected in 2005 there were 20 Uzbek MPs all aligned with Jombesh; in the current parliament there are 17 Uzbek MPs. In conversations with party officials, they concede that they count on 24 MPs overall as being their allies – with no more than 15 currently aligned with Jombesh. However, they are fairly confident that the remainder will

The party's poor showing at the parliamentary polls was largely due to the increasing fragmentation within the party leadership, the emergence of a group of younger Turkish-educated leaders, the so-called 'Aidan group', and fractures within the old PDPA-dominated reformist group that widened as the party's failure in the parliamentary elections became obvious. The talks about a fourth party congress, which had been put on hold due to the elections of 2010, intensified thereafter. But protracted wrangling between the various groups meant that the process of actually calling the congress was not set in motion until the party secretariat's meeting on 24 April 2011.

4. AT THE CROSSROADS – THE FOURTH PARTY CONGRESS

The calling of the fourth party congress is significant in itself as it shows the adherence of all players within Jombesh to the general principles regarding the transfer of power within the party as set out in the party charter and agreed by previous congresses. Secondly, it also gives the opportunity to further push the reform of the party. The fourth congress will put the party at the crossroads in this regard: Will it be able to consolidate gains and pursue further reforms? Or will a resurgent Dostum stall further development of the party? Or will the internal splits lead to a break-up of the party? The fact that the congress is yet to materialise almost a year after it was called is a worrying sign.

The party needs to reassess its current position and bridge the internal rifts in order to be able to pursue further reforms. Dostum's hand is stronger than it has been for years, and it is further strengthened by the deteriorating security conditions in the country, including the gradual expansion of the Taleban in northern Afghanistan.³² This enables him to play on the fears of the local population. Reforms and the evolution of the party are further challenged by the fact that the leading advocates of reform within the party are in disagreement on how to pursue reform. While this has always been a factor, the current disagreements are deeper.

largely support Jombesh as long as their own personal interests do not conflict with the party's. Conversations with Jombesh officials, Kabul, November and December 2010.

³² See Antonio Giustozzi and Christoph Reuter, 'The Insurgents of the Afghan North', AAN Thematic Report 04/2011, *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, May 2011, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=1679>.

The party's failure in the 2010 parliamentary elections has led reformers to draw different conclusions. One group has come to the inference that the party needs to break with General Dostum completely, in effect oust him from the party, as well as to force out the remaining former military commanders who are seen as impeding the party's efforts to evolve away from its politico-military past. They would have liked to call the party congress at the earliest possible time, so as to not allow Dostum time to rally more support. Another group believes that the failure in the elections is due to Jombesh's inability to present itself as a united front and that this shows the need for the party to close ranks. This group, therefore, is currently seeking to bring together the various groups of the party and to consequently proceed more slowly with the preparations for the congress. If they succeed, the cohesion and unity of the party will be gained at the expense of further reforms.³³ Both groups see a need for replacing the current party chairman, Sayyed Nurullah. They see him as inefficient and politically weakened, largely due to his failure to gain a seat in parliament in the 2010 elections, despite standing for a seat in Jowzjan province in the very heartland of Jombesh. This amounted to a huge personal political setback for him. Aware of the fact that he is likely to lose his position, Nurullah consequently remains the only leading member of the party who is not backing the meeting of the congress. He has also expressed worries that a congress at this time could split the party.³⁴

At the same time, a new force, known as the Aidan group, has emerged within the party. The group is composed of some of the young men who, with Dostum's blessing, were sent to Turkey on education scholarships during the 1990s. Most of them have spent years there, learned Turkish and gained university degrees before beginning to return to Afghanistan following the fall of the Taleban. The most well-known member of this group is the current governor of Jowzjan, Alem Sahi. For some Uzbeks, he and his fellow students represent the next generation of leaders within Jombesh, educated and untainted by the wars of the 1990s. Following his appointment as governor, Sahi slowly drifted away from Dostum, to whom he had originally been close, and towards the direction of the group of reformers who argue for a more radical approach to reform, in effect, to oust Dostum from the party. There was a widespread

³³ Conversations with Jombesh officials, Kabul, February and April 2011.

³⁴ Conversations with Jombesh officials, Kabul, September-November 2010 and February 2011.

belief amongst senior Jombesh members that Sahi and the Aidan group both emerged too early for them to have an impact on the politics of the party, as they were seen as still too young and inexperienced for the current power struggle. Early indications ahead of the congress suggest that Alem Sahi in fact has drifted away from the reformers and back towards Dostum. With his support, Sahi is now considered a possible frontrunner for the chairmanship. It looks as if the Aidan group has skillfully inserted itself into the power equations, avoiding alienating Dostum.³⁵ Jombesh's current internal power dynamics are further complicated by the fact that several leftist Jombesh off-shots are drifting back into the fold of the party.³⁶

These power struggles within the party have been clearly manifested in the convoluted process that led to the 20 October 2011 decision to call the fourth party congress. On 24 April 2011, an initial decision was made by the party secretariat to recommend holding a congress, following lengthy wrangling within the group and obfuscation by the chairman, Nurullah. The meeting was a tense affair in which there were significant differences of opinion on how the process leading to the congress would be structured. Apart from the chairman, there was unanimous agreement to call the congress and that, in accordance with the party charter, the Political Committee was to discuss the matter next. But already here frictions began. One group wanted the Political Committee to endorse the decision of the secretariat and to forward it to the Central Council to formally call the congress, in line with the party charter. The other faction, however, referred to an emergency clause in the charter and argued that the Political Committee should call the congress itself based on this clause, thus circumventing normal procedures, in order to

³⁵ Conversations with Jombesh officials in Kabul, February 2011 and December 2011, and telephone interview with Jombesh official, November 2011.

³⁶ These include Groh-e Kar [Labour Group] and SAPZA. Groh-e Kar is a group of Uzbek intellectuals that sometimes constituted a faction of the PDPA and sometimes operated like a separate party between the 1980s and the present. SAPZA (Sazman-e Peshahang-e Zahmatkashan-e Afghanistan/Vanguard Organisation of Afghanistan's Toilers) was a northern splinter group of Setam-e Mellii, another breakaway faction of the PDPA that followed a sometimes strong anti-Pashtun minority agenda. Already in the early 1970s, it had embarked on an urban guerrilla war against the then monarchy and the following governments; SAPZA maintained some local militias who sometimes cooperated with Jamiat. The original Setamis were responsible for the failed kidnapping of the American ambassador Adolphe Dubs in 1979 in Kabul, in which the ambassador was killed.

speed up the process. This group contained the more radical reformers who would have liked to see a congress called quickly so that Dostum would have less time to manoeuvre. They also argued that the Central Council's current composition did not properly reflect the third party congress, as manipulations by Dostum had led to its enormous expansion, fearing that the council would thus be susceptible to his influence.³⁷ Frantic preparations were immediately initiated for the meeting of the Political Committee.

The committee met on 2 May 2011 in Mazar-e Sharif. Out of the 55 members, approximately two thirds were present. The exact number is disputed. What is clear is, however, that Ismail Munshi, one of the most outspoken proponents of the 'short cut' option and one of the most vocal Dostum critics, walked out of the meeting before it even started. According to one account, close to half of the committee members present followed him. They are, however, reported to have returned to the committee's deliberations later, with the single exception of Munshi. At the meeting, some members argued for a short cut of the normal procedures and urged the committee to call the congress itself. A minority reportedly supported this line. The majority, however, supported the 'institutional approach', calling the congress through the Central Council as per the regular procedure. According to the first account, when this became clear a second walkout occurred before a vote was actually held. The key point of this account is that the walkout led the committee to lose the necessary quorum to make a valid and binding decision. According to a second account of the events, there was no second walkout at all and that, in fact, the only one who ever left the session was Munshi.³⁸

Following the decision to gather the Central Council, plans began for the gathering of this body. The ambitious, but realistic, aim was to hold it just after the holy month of Ramadan, in early September 2011. After Ramadan and the end of the parliamentary standoff that followed the disputed 2010 parliamentary elections,³⁹ Jombesh

³⁷ Conversations with Jombesh officials in Kabul, April 2011.

³⁸ Conversations with Jombesh officials in Kabul, May 2011.

³⁹ For details see Martine van Bijlert, 'How to read the presidential ruling', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 11 August 2011, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=2009>; Martine van Bijlert, 'Responses to the president's ruling; will the opposition hold?', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 15 August 2011, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=2017>; Martine

leaders, in particular Sayed Nurullah, stepped up their efforts to get the party moving towards the Central Council meeting. This included attempts to patch up some of the divisions. Party insiders indicate that some semblance of unity was achieved just ahead of the council gathering that, in the end, occurred on 20 October 2011.⁴⁰ It looked like some sort of agreement had been reached to side-line the challenge of the more radical leaning reformers. Although details are murky, it is likely that the broader reform group had reached a consensus with the Aidan group to jointly seek greater influence in the party at the fourth congress but without challenging Dostum's continued influence over the party.⁴¹

The 20 October Central Council meeting in Sheberghan was started with a speech read on behalf of General Dostum who was not present. In the speech, he stressed the importance of the unity of the party and also criticized the government for not keeping its election promises to Jombesh. He concluded by saying that the fourth party congress was an excellent opportunity to reassess the politics of the party. In fact, Jombesh had just participated in the formation of the National Front, an opposition movement. Jombesh's open participation in it signalled the party's move into opposition after a longer period in support of President Karzai. Dostum's speech also contained an interesting reference to the Aidan group: he specifically mentioned it alongside 'the youth and younger members' as one of the groups that would be given 'more say' in the party and larger representation in its leading organs.⁴²

Chairman Sayed Nurullah, in his speech, then outlined the progress of the party, its successes and its main policy lines. He was far more explicit in his critique of the government than Dostum but also frankly assessed that it was a failure of the party itself that it had not been able to push through its demands with the government. He blamed this on the increasing disunity within the party and made a veiled but strong reference to

van Bijlert, 'A new result for the parliamentary election?', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 21 August 2011, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=2032>; Fabrizio Foschini and Gran Hewad, 'Nine out, nine in: and 240 in between', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 4 September 2011, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=2053>.

⁴⁰ Telephone interview with Jombesh official in Kabul, November 2011.

⁴¹ Telephone interview with Jombesh official in Kabul, November 2011.

⁴² Unofficial English translation of the written version of Dostum's speech.

the radical reformers, calling them out of touch with the realities. He also mentioned the disunity as one reason for the party's failure in the parliamentary elections. He then painted a bleak picture of the current state of affairs in the country, reiterating some of Jombesh's main policy lines, such as the need for a federal system of government. He concluded by stating, just like Dostum, that the fourth party congress would provide an excellent opportunity to discuss the future direction of the party.⁴³

The Central Council by majority decided to call the party congress and set the date for just after Afghan New Year's Day, on 21 March 2012. It mandated the Political Committee to select a Preparation Committee that would start making the preparations for the congress. Continued frictions and further power struggles within the party have meant, however, that the Preparation Committee had yet to be set up when this paper went into publication. The delay has perhaps also been influenced by the launch of a new opposition alliance (National Front of Afghanistan – NFA)⁴⁴ that includes Jombesh and has given Dostum an additional political platform in which he, as one of the NFA's few principal leaders, has greater ownership than in his own party. At the same time it also looks like chairman Sayed Nurullah - despite playing a positive role in the run up to the central council gathering, but fearful of losing his position, - has reverted to his previous stalling tactics. This means that at present it is unclear when – or even whether - the fourth party congress will take place.

5. CONCLUSIONS – THE POTENTIAL EXAMPLE OF JOMBESH

Jombesh still has not managed, despite its attempts at reshaping its image and its pursuit of democratic reforms, to shed its image of old – that of a politico-military organisation tainted by the 1990s factional wars, as the political vehicle of one of Afghanistan's former warlords and an ethnically

⁴³ Unofficial English translation of the written version of Nurullah's speech. The passage about the federal system can be found on pages 5 and 6: 'Our party has from the beginning been crying for a federal system in Afghanistan and we are still on it...'

⁴⁴ More detail see: Thomas Ruttig, 'National Coalition vs National Front: Two opposition alliances put Jamiat in a dilemma', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 4 January 2012, <http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/index.asp?id=2418>.

based party of the Uzbeks. The reform process is neither linear nor its gains irreversible; sometimes it is even regressing. Although the Jombesh reformers have gained some positions in the party and often set the agenda, they have not been able thus far to move the party forward as a whole. Some achievements like the side-lining of Dostum have even been rolled back.

Reasons for their lack of success so far are their own tactical differences, their inability – and sometimes unwillingness – to distance themselves from General Dostum, the persistent role of former military commanders, and outside interference such as the Karzai government. But the continued reform struggles of Jombesh can have possible potential implications for the future of Afghan politics.

Perhaps it is too much to hope that even a successful transformation of Jombesh into a modern democratic party, or at least towards more internal democratisation, would impact the larger body of Afghan politics or could set an example for similar political forces, particularly among the other tanzims. But the fact remains that, to this day, Jombesh is the only one of the old politico-military factions of the 1970-90s that has actually embarked on a sustained reform process.⁴⁵ Its continuation could further embolden reformers in other parties and factions and inspire similar reforms that in turn could spark a much-needed opening of the political space and more modern forms of political mobilisation than just through commander networks and by 'jihadi leaders'

⁴⁵ A few other parties have made moves to reform but none of them have managed sustained efforts. Hezb-e Afghanistan-e Newin, led by Yunus Qanuni, a more modern, party-like offshoot of traditionally network-like Jamiat-e Islami, was dismantled again in 2005. Jamiat-e Islami itself has, after the assassination of its 'historical' leader Burhanuddin Rabbani, been forced to regulate the succession and are, according to reports, well advanced with plans for a party congress. Hezb-e Islami Afghanistan has since its creation held one party congress and has made some moves towards reforming itself. (This refers to its wing that it registered as a political party in Afghanistan. Another wing, often referred to as as Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin, or HIG, because of its leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, belongs to the armed opposition to the Afghan government). The party is impressively organized, but its suspected links to HIG continue to cast shadows over its efforts. In addition, since the change of leadership in 2007 (from Khaled Faruqi to Hadi Arghandiwal) and its congress ('national gathering') in 2008 not much else has happened, apart from a new splintering into two rivaling wings. Ideas to re-unite different factions of Hezb-e Wahdat, as a first step away from one-person dominated politics, seem to be off the agenda, too.

monopolising power. Even slight positive changes could have larger positive implications for the overall political climate in Afghanistan, which would be much needed ahead of the next election cycle in 2014-15. Potentially Jombesh, with its secular character, could help to fill the current void⁴⁶ in the centre of the Afghan political scene⁴⁷ and with its leftist background it could perhaps also help energize the centre left. Either way it would help create a useful balance to the otherwise dominating conservative Islamic forces.

An eventual transformation, however, is a much-preferred alternative to a reversal of the reform process or even its disintegration into a number of splinter parties. Both of these events would be discouraging warning signs for others and could in fact entrench resistance to reforms in the other tanzims. In addition, a disintegration of the party would likely have consequences for the stability of some parts of northern Afghanistan. Thus a continued peaceful and successful transition in one of the larger parties in the country leading to its transformation from a military-political organisation to a true democratic political party should be supported to – if nothing else – set a rare positive democratic example.

⁴⁶ For more on this void in the Afghan political scene see Thomas Ruttig, 'Islamists, leftists and a void in the centre – Afghanistan's Political Parties and where they come from (1902-2006)', *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung*, Kabul, November 2006, <http://www.kas.de/afghanistan/en/publications/9674/>.

⁴⁷ The November 2011 launch of *Hezb-e Haq wa Adalat*, the 'Rights and Justice Party', a centrist reformist party, is the first serious addition to this void. For more details on this party see Thomas Ruttig, 'Right and Justice Party launched, as "reformist opposition"', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 3 November 2011, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=2209>.

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This paper exclusively reflects the author's personal view.