

TheNational

Warlord returns to campaign for Karzai

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Last Updated: August 17, 2009 10:58PM UAE / August 17, 2009 6:58PM GMT

SHIBERGHAN // It was a triumphant homecoming for the exiled warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum as he stood in front of thousands of supporters yesterday and pledged his backing for Hamid Karzai, who is fighting to retain the presidency.

Mr Dostum left of his own accord for Turkey more than a year ago amid accusations of war crimes and a scandal involving an alleged drunken physical assault on a political rival. But members of his party threatened to boycott Thursday's election if he did not return.

After waiting hours in the blazing sun, the crowd surged toward the stage as Mr Dostum arrived. He thanked those who held demonstrations demanding he be allowed back into the country.

"There was a rumour that if I came to Afghanistan the Americans would arrest me, but I'm a man and not afraid of things like that," he told cheering supporters.

The US Embassy in Kabul released a statement yesterday citing "serious concerns" about his role in Afghanistan's political climate and particularly the upcoming elections.

"Among other concerns, his reputed past actions raise questions of his culpability for massive human rights violations," the statement said.

Among other atrocities, Mr Dostum is blamed for the possible killing of hundreds of Taliban prisoners during the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. He was a key US ally at the time, and there have been reports that he was working with US special forces and receiving funding from the CIA.

Kenja Kargar, the provincial head of Mr Dostum's party, Junbesh, claimed in an interview that the accusations were unfounded and that Mr Dostum had freed Taliban prisoners from the southern province of Kandahar, and even given them clothes and money to return home.

The Uzbek strongman could deliver an important voting block to Mr Karzai, who faces a potentially low turnout among his fellow Pashtuns in the south, who have been threatened with violence by the Taliban should they participate in the elections.

"We must go with Karzai into the future," said Mr Dostum on the last official day of campaigning. "We must not let it go to a second round."

Although Mr Dostum had backed Mr Karzai even while in Turkey, some of his supporters threatened to vote for Mr Karzai's closest challenger, Abdullah Abdullah.

The governor of neighbouring Balkh province, Atta Mohammad Noor, is openly supporting Mr Abdullah – posters depicting the two are plastered throughout Mazar-e-Sharif, the provincial capital – despite electoral laws making it illegal for government officials to campaign for particular candidates. A high turnout for Mr Abdullah combined with a low number of voters in the Pashtun south could force a second round of elections.

By delivering key votes in the north, which is predominantly ethnically Tajik and Uzbek, Mr Dostum could become a crucial ally for Mr Karzai. But he is a controversial one.

Just past midnight on February 3, 2008, Mr Dostum and about 50 armed men broke into the Kabul home of Akbar Bay, a former associate, and beat up Mr Bay and his son. Mr Dostum and his associates then allegedly kidnapped them and brought them to his home in Kabul, where they were later released and taken to hospital.



Abdul Rashid Dostum speaks to supporters at a rally in Shiberghan after returning to Afghanistan yesterday from self-imposed exile in Turkey. **Jared Ferrie / The National**

The following day, the interior ministry spokesman Zahir Azimy told reporters that Mr Dostum was “drunk” at the time.

Mr Kargar said yesterday the incident was a personal matter between Mr Dostum and Mr Bay that had been blown out of proportion by Mr Dostum’s political enemies.

But Afghans watched live on television the next morning as Mr Dostum shook his fist from his balcony at police who had surrounded his opulent mansion. Police finally backed down rather than storming Mr Dostum’s house. The attorney general, Abdul Jabar Sabit, later admitted that acting on criminal charges could lead to factional fighting in Mr Dostum’s northern stronghold.

At the time, Mr Dostum was a member of the United Front, a coalition of warlords, former communists and politicians who opposed Mr Karzai. The Front warned of “catastrophic consequences” should Mr Dostum be arrested.

Mr Dostum also ran against Mr Karzai in the 2004 presidential election.

Mr Dostum’s recent U-turn in deciding to back Mr Karzai in this election comes as no surprise to observers of Afghanistan’s history. Mr Dostum spent most of the 1980s fighting on the side of Afghanistan’s Soviet-backed communist government before defecting to the mujahideen, who eventually defeated the communists. During the civil war that followed, he switched sides numerous times while maintaining control of a heavily armed private army and running the territory under his control as a private fiefdom.

Judging by the rapturous crowd at yesterday’s rally, Mr Dostum still commands much support in the north. This is to Mr Karzai’s advantage at the moment, but it is anyone’s guess when his allegiances could switch again.

During the rally, Mr Dostum promised to build up his Junbesh party over the next few years and made a special appeal to Pashtuns to join. He threw copies of his own political manifesto to the crowd.

“There will be a day, God willing, when I can help all of the people of Afghanistan again,” he said

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