

Return of Former Communists Stirs Up Afghan Elections

By [CARLOTTA GALL](#)
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KHOST, [Afghanistan](#), Aug. 31 - The outriders decorated their motorbikes with sunflowers, and at every stop people tossed flowers at their convoy and offered prayers.

The former Communist general Shahnawaz Tanai was returning to his home district after 32 years to make a political comeback, and the Tanai tribe accorded him the traditional greeting.

The political return of dozens of former Communists, among them General Tanai, 54, who was Afghan chief of staff, then defense minister in the brutal Soviet occupation in the 1980's, is one of the most contentious issues of this election campaign.

General Tanai is perhaps most infamous for leading a coup in 1990, with the renegade mujahedeen commander Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, against President Muhammad Najibullah. The coup failed and he fled to [Pakistan](#), where he lived in exile until Aug. 7.

The general is not running in Afghanistan's parliamentary and provincial elections on Sept. 18, but he is calculating on winning a sizable bloc in Parliament with candidates from his Afghanistan Peace Movement Party and two other parties of former Communists who have joined him in a coalition. They are fielding 200 candidates around the country, most of them former Communists and some Soviet-era ministers and participants in the half a dozen coups of the last three decades.

"Our party is a national political party based on Islam and national unity," General Tanai said in an interview. "Above all we want the rule of law." He denied plotting the 1990 coup and said Mr. Najibullah had planned it against his own ministers.

President Hamid Karzai has encouraged many of the rogues of Afghanistan's recent history to take part in the elections in an effort to unite the country and foster political stability. A senior security official, who asked not to be identified to avoid angering the political factions, said that he saw little threat from the former Communists because they had no military power, but that the jihadi leaders were still a menace. Yet the return of the Communists to public life is reopening the violent struggle between Communists and Islamists that tore this country apart in the 1980's, and made it the arena for the last proxy conflict of the cold war.

The mujahedeen, who were backed by the [United States](#) in their struggle against the Communists, are watching with anger and some confusion as their enemies regain positions in the government and may win a sizable bloc in Parliament in American-supported elections.

Nevertheless, the mujahedeen are also entering the political race, to fight their old foes at the ballot box. A week into the election campaign in this unruly eastern province, Khost's voters have been presented with a bewildering array of candidates. In all, 214 have registered, with 91 competing for just five seats from Khost in the Wolesi Jirga or lower house of Parliament, 121 competing for the nine-seat provincial council, and 2 Kuchis, nomads who have a separate seat allocation in Parliament.

Afghans here are expected to vote along tribal lines, many say, but within each tribe they have a choice between the former Communists on one side and the traditional tribal leaders and mujahedeen commanders on the other. Added to the mix are Westernized candidates who have returned from two decades in exile in the United States or Western Europe, and members of the local educated elite, who offer a complete break from the political and military figures of the last two decades.

Campaigning in Khost is far from the Western experience, with most candidates dealing directly with the tribal elders, knowing that they will tell their communities how to vote.

One candidate, Shir Khosti, who returned from 20 years in the United States, where he ran cellphone shops with his brother, to work for the governor of Khost, is running a relatively Western-style campaign, focusing on younger voters. He is visiting high schools, where he urges 18- to 20-year-olds, who are still in school making up lost years of education, to make their own choice, rather than follow the decision of their elders, as tradition dictates.

Mr. Khosti, the son of a former parliamentarian who was executed by the Communists, dislikes the Communists and the Islamic fundamentalists among the mujahedeen.

"The trouble here is the people don't know what they need," he said. "It's not enough just being a good guy. A representative has to have the mental capacity to deliver a lot of goods."

One of the leading female candidates, Sahera Sharif, knows better than to tell tribal elders what to think. When meeting villagers in Bak, Ms. Sharif, a teacher and development worker, vows to work for Islam, and to help women "within the parameters of Islam."

Another former Communist, Maj. Gen. Sayed Muhammad Gulabzoi, 54, who is widely expected to win a parliamentary seat, was receiving supporters in a rented house in Khost, the provincial capital, a few days ago. "Lots of tribal people are coming to see me here," he said. "I have no plans to go out. If you are not at home, that is considered very bad here."

General Gulabzoi took part in the overthrow of King Zahir Shah in 1973 - and virtually every coup since - and was aide de camp to the ruthless Communist leader Nur Muhammad Taraki and then interior minister for all of the Soviet occupation. He returned to Afghanistan 16 months ago after 17 years in exile in [Russia](#).

"People died and were wounded, and I am very sad for that," he said of his years in power. "But I did not do anything bad to the people of Khost."

He spoke with a district leader, a former mujahid, who pledged his vote and those of his district to General Gulabzoi. "We will vote for an educated person, a good person, who will do something for the people," said the district leader, Shahazar Khan. "In all his life, he has not owned a house or a car, so that means he is honest."

Many of the mujahedeen have been branded warlords, especially in Kabul, and accused by human rights groups of abuses in the civil war of the 1990's and of graft and land grabbing since they returned to power in 2001 after the fall of the Taliban. Yet in Khost, some voters voiced hatred for the Communists and enthusiastic support for local mujahedeen leaders, saying many had served the people honestly.

The communists "put me in prison for five and a half months," said Hajji Mazub, the elder of a village in Yakubi district of Khost Province. "They were the reason we all had to live as refugees in Pakistan for 20 years. We will never vote for the Communists." Hajji Mir Dil Spin-Zadran, a well-known mujahedeen commander and tribal leader who is running for the Wolesi Jirga, said: "Khost is the home of the mujahedeen, and the people are the supporters of the mujahedeen. Most people in the cities were Communists and in the villages the people support the mujahedeen."

"They should not have taken this opportunity to seek power," he said of General Gulabzoi, who is from his own village, and General Tanai. "They should just sit at home and live quietly."

Hajji Spin-Zadran gathered more than 200 tribal elders on a hilltop outside his home on Wednesday to seek their support for him in the elections. "May God give our country back into our hands. During the jihad we had to win our country back; now we have to rebuild it," a cleric said in introducing him.

"I did not plan to run for Parliament, but I am running because of the jihad and for Islam," Hajji Spin-Zadran told the gathering. "I am not thinking about money, or having a good time, only about my people, my nation and my tribe."

As he spoke, tribesmen stood and called him to stop, assuring him of their support. "Inshallah," said Hajji Sherzad, a tribesman from a nearby village. "He is the one. We have put our hands on him."

Attackers Kill 9, Including Candidate

By The New York Times

KABUL, Afghanistan, Sept. 4 - Another election candidate and eight other people were killed in Afghanistan in several attacks, officials said Sunday, blaming Taliban militants.

It was the second day of attacks and raised fears the Taliban were continuing to step up violence in an effort to disrupt elections on Sept. 18.

Habibullah Khan, a candidate from the Garmser district in Helmand Province, was killed when his car hit a land mine, said the deputy police chief of Helmand, Col. Muhammad Ayub. "He lost his leg, and we brought him to the Emergency Hospital in the capital and he died at noon," Colonel Ayub said.

Mr. Khan was the fifth candidate to be killed. An additional candidate was abducted Saturday in Kandahar Province and is thought to have been killed, a police officer in Kandahar said. The Taliban claimed responsibility for abducting and killing five people on Saturday, including the candidate and a local district chief.

In Helmand on Sunday morning, a district police chief, Amanullah Khan, his son and two bodyguards were killed in an ambush by men suspected of being Taliban insurgents in Doshi, Colonel Ayub said.