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Hamid Karzai's Second Term as Afghanistan's President: Promises, Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

Hamid Karzai was sworn in as Afghanistan's president on 19 November 2009 after being ratified as the winner in the elections held on 20 August 2009. The long delay in being sworn in was caused by the successful challenge launched by Dr Abdullah Abdullah to the election results. Abdullah had received the second highest votes in the contested elections. A run-off election was ordered for 7 November 2009 but was cancelled when Abdullah withdrew from the contest, clearing the way for the swearing-in ceremony.²

President Karzai begins his second term at a very difficult time for his country. The resurgent Taliban have tightened their grip on Afghanistan, leaving only Kabul in the control of the government. In order to win his second term, Karzai had aligned himself with a number of warlords who were known to have plundered the country. Even before Karzai was sworn in for a second term, the United States administration, headed by President Barack Obama, became engaged in an intensive review of its position on Afghanistan. The review has been undertaken as public support in the United States for the war in Afghanistan has declined to a point where most people favour the withdrawal of American troops. Whether Karzai would govern the country differently in order to continue receiving help from the world outside is a question frequently being asked as he begins his second term.

Pledges by Karzai

On the eve of Karzai being sworn in for his second term as Afghanistan's president, much of the country was in the hands of the Taliban and deadly insurgent attacks were occurring in

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² See my earlier ISAS Briefs for a discussion of the elections – "Afghanistan Presidential Elections 2009: Developments since the fall of the Taliban", ISAS Brief No. 123, 17 August 2009 (accessed at <http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/events/backgroundbriefs/124.pdf>); "Afghanistan Elections 2009: The Day of Reckoning", ISAS Brief No. 126, 31 August 2009 (accessed at <http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/events/backgroundbriefs/127.pdf>); and "Afghanistan Presidential Election 2009: The Run-up to the Run-off", 4 November 2009, ISAS Brief No. 134 (accessed at <http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/events/backgroundbriefs/135.pdf>).

Kabul. According to one newspaper account, “Mr Karzai’s inauguration took place amid virtual lockdown of the Afghan capital, with government offices closed and streets blocked off of all traffic in the city centre. He took the oath of office in the white-columned hall in the heavily-guarded presidential palace, where some key Western dignitaries, including United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton as well as Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, sat in [the] front row.”³ Eight hundred guests were invited to the palace to witness the swearing-in ceremony. Karzai spoke for 30 minutes. Mrs Clinton said that she was “very heartened” by the speech. “He could have been very vague [about corruption] and talked about how we’re all against it and we all want to end it. But he got much more specific and we’re going to watch along with the people of Afghanistan how that’s implemented.”

The president’s speech was a long laundry list, detailing what his government would do during his second five-year term with several time-specific targets laid down. President Obama, while on a nine-day long visit to Asia, had laid down a target of his own, saying that he wanted to end the Afghan War before the end of his presidency. Karzai provided his own framework within which his government would act. In the next two years, all private security firms – widely used by coalition forces to defend their bases and supply lines – would cede their functions to the Afghan government. After three years, the president said, the Afghans should be able to lead and conduct operations around the country. “The roles of the international troops will be gradually reduced and limited to support and training of Afghan forces”. By the end of his five-year term, Karzai added, Afghan forces should be “capable of taking the lead in ensuring security and stability across the country”. At that time, no foreign troop presence would be required to deal with internal security.

Karzai also promised to reach out to the moderate elements within the Taliban movement. He said that reconciliation with these people will be given a high priority by his administration. “To put an end to three decades of war is what most Afghans want,” he said, adding that “peace and security cannot be achieved only militarily.” He said he would convene another *log jirga* (an assembly of elders) that would include those Taliban who were prepared to work with the government. However, Afghan-led efforts at dialogue with insurgents had achieved little and “experts say funds devoted to encouraging fighters to give up their cause have been squandered”.⁴

Concern with Corruption

The international community has been extremely concerned with corruption in the Karzai administration. *The Washington Post* published a detailed account of how one of the senior ministers of the administration had taken US\$30 million from a Chinese company for a contract to explore and exploit Afghanistan’s rich copper deposits. Keeping such stories in mind, Karzai vowed to end the “culture of impunity and violation of law and bring to justice those involved in spreading corruption and abuse public property” and dismiss corrupt officials. “For some time now, the world media has widely reported on corruption in our country’s offices and administration. Whatever the truth may be, these allegations have given the Afghan administration a very bad reputation. Corruption and bribery constitute a very dangerous problem.” However, he also laid part of the blame on the international community itself. He singled out the aid system, saying a “lack of transparency and accountability in aid

³ Alan Cullison and Anand Gopal, “Karzai has plenty of promises for the West”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 November 2009, p. A14.

⁴ Joshua Partlow, “Karzai sets key goals in inaugural address”, *The Washington Post*, 20 November 2009, p. A13.

spending reduces people's trust and causes the spread of administrative corruption". He vowed to push for a law requiring all senior officials to declare their properties and assets. He promised to convene a conference to generate ideas to fight corruption and said that his cabinet would include "expert ministers" who could lead with integrity. He did not minimise the task that lay ahead and was no longer dismissive of the role the international community could play in helping him to reach his goals.

Softening of the United States' Stance

The United States also softened its position towards the president. Karzai had taken a very tough position with respect to the United States and its allies in a wide-ranging interview with Margaret Warner of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), which aired a day before the swearing-in ceremony. The widely-watched interview was not well received in Washington. Karzai said that much of the blame for his country's current situation could be laid at the doorstep of the United States, which had left suddenly after the Soviet Union pulled out its troops in 1989. This left the country hostage to the whims and interests of its neighbours, a clear reference to Pakistan. Asked about his reaction to the decision of the United Nations to pull its staff out of the country following an attack on their office in Kabul that left several people dead, he said it would make no difference to him or his administration if the United Nations did not return. He went on to say that the United States was in Afghanistan not to help his country but to fight its war against terrorism.

After showing some irritation at the president, Washington concluded that it would not serve its purpose to have a cantankerous Head of State sitting on the other side of the table in its dealings. "It is not sustainable to have a 'War of the Roses' relationship here where we basically throw things at each other", a senior administration official told Rajiv Chandrasekaran, the Pulitzer Prize-winning correspondent of *The Washington Post* who had done extensive reporting on Iraq and now covers Afghanistan. A significant change occurred in the environment surrounding the United States' dealing with the Afghan president as he was preparing to be sworn in. "When a team of senior United States officials led by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton entered the presidential palace on Wednesday [18 November 2009] for a dinner meeting, they had little indication of what Afghan President Hamid Karzai planned to discuss, or whether questions about corruption and governance would pitch their host into a foul mood", Chandrasekaran wrote for his newspaper. "But instead of revisiting old disputes, Karzai brought in several cabinet ministers to talk about development and security. He explained details of a new effort to address graft. And halfway through a meal of lamb stew, chicken and rice, he looked across the table and said he had decided that the United States would be a 'critical partner' in his second term."⁵ This was a different tone from the one he had adopted in the much-discussed PBS interview. Secretary Clinton stayed back after the dinner for a 90-minute one-on-one meeting with the Afghan leader. She told the president that "future levels of development aid will be linked to improvements in governance and she urged him to use merit, not cronyism, as a criterion for filling cabinet posts. She also indicated that the White House would seek to have the Afghan government meet as yet-to-be defined benchmarks of progress as a condition of United States security and development assistance".⁶

⁵ Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "A softer approach to Karzai", *The Washington Post*, 20 November 2009, pp. A1 and A12.

⁶ Ibid.

Secretary Clinton continued with the conciliatory tone after hearing the speech by the president. “We want to assist him and the military and police leadership in Afghanistan to move as quickly as they can, to stand up and deploy a professional, motivated, effective force”, she said at a news conference. “The road ahead is fraught with challenges and imperfect choices, setbacks are inevitable, and we have to be realistic about what we can accomplish”, she continued. As if to underscore the point she was making, two United States service members were killed in a bombing in southern Afghanistan, close to the border with Pakistan on the day Karzai was sworn in, and a suicide bomber detonated explosives in a market, killing at least 10 people.

The softening in the United States’ stance towards Karzai came with an increase in the role the Obama administration gave to Mrs Clinton. According to one analyst, “it is far from clear that President Obama can depend on President Karzai to bring order to this violent country, but it is becoming clear that he will depend on Hillary Rodham Clinton to be his go-between in dealing with the mercurial Afghan leader.”⁷ Some other senior officials of the Obama administration had found it difficult to work with the Afghan president. Vice President Joseph Biden once stalked out of a dinner meeting with Karzai 10 days before he and Obama took office while Richard Holbrooke, President Obama’s special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, had annoyed the Afghan leader by adopting a hectoring tone. Karl W. Eikenberry had, at best, a working relationship with Karzai, unlike Zalmay Khalilzad, one of his predecessors, who had become a close associate and adviser of the president. It took a visit and display of extraordinary patience by Senator John Kerry to convince Karzai to accept that it was in his interest to agree to a run-off election. Kerry was travelling in the area when Holbrooke failed to convince the Afghan leader and was persuaded to play the role of an emissary. Secretary Clinton was, therefore, filling an important role in that she was combining her experience as a politician with respect to some of the achievements of the Karzai administration.

When interviewed about her role in Afghanistan, Mrs Clinton reminded the press that when Karzai took office, there were only one million students in the country, virtually all boys. Today, there are seven million students, 40 percent of them girls. When asked to comment about corruption in the country and the rumour that the president’s brother was involved in the drug trade, she said that, “every country makes compromises, and it behoves you to be humble about pointing fingers. It also is a reminder that we have to do more to support his campaign against corruption. We have to facilitate, not impede, the removal of those who are corrupt.” The Obama administration, she went on say, was prepared to work with Karzai, stating that, “I would imagine that, if things go well, that we would be helping with education and health systems and agricultural productivity long after the military presence had either diminished or disappeared.”

After the discussion with the press, Mrs Clinton flew back to Washington to join the debate on the size of the American military contingent in Afghanistan. President Obama said that he was close to reaching a decision as he also headed back to Washington after concluding a nine-day visit to Asia.

⁷ Mark Landler, “Clinton emerges as Obama’s closest link to Afghanistan’s unsteady leader”, *The New York Times*, 20 November 2009. The evolving Obama-Clinton relationship is now the subject of considerable interest in the press. See also Daniel Dombey, “The Obama Clinton story promises many twists in plot”, *Financial Times*, 21 November 2009, p. 2.

Conclusion

Following his swearing-in, Karzai has made a list of things to do in his second term as Afghanistan's president and has promised action on a number of fronts. He is fully aware of the domestic dilemmas and the concerns of the international community, particularly the United States, and has his work cut out for him. Mrs Clinton has promised the United States' support and it would be interesting to see the outcome of President Obama's decision on American troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, regardless of the decision taken in Washington, Karzai has a mountain to climb and he should start scaling it soonest.

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